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After weeks of nudging people to leave, a Clifton homeless camp is cleared away



JENNIFER BROWN/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Mike Ramadani of the Passaic County Sewerage Commission River Restoration Department looks over the mounds of garbage he will help to remove from a homeless encampment underneath the Ackerman Avenue bridge on June 6, 2016.

BY JEFF GREEN

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CLIFTON — City officials and volunteers worked together for a month to try to move more than a dozen homeless people living under a bridge into shelters. In the end, they're efforts met with little success.

On Monday morning, under pressure to remove the encampment that officials said was a public health hazard, a crew with removal equipment went to work clearing away mattresses and other debris where several people had made their homes.

Before the camp beneath the Ackerman Avenue bridge was dismantled, seven men had remained, some of them asleep on old mattresses surrounded by mounds of trash.

When told the city planned to clear everything out, a few of the men said "OK" and "alright," then grabbed some of their belongings and walked away. One man washed his face with water that trickled under the bridge on his way out.

Animal control officers removed six kittens and their mother from the dwelling before a Bobcat, a compact demolition machine, started snapping up mattresses and dragging them through mud and piles of beer cans to a dumpster. A veterinarian will examine the cats, and they may be made available for adoption at the Clifton Animal Shelter within a week, said John Biegel, the city health officer.

It didn't take long for a few workers in the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission river program to dismantle the dwelling. Mattresses, heaps of clothing and paintings that had hung on a chain-link fence were consumed by the jaws of the Bobcat and hauled away one-by-one.

About an hour after the machine went to work, a massive pile of garbage was all that remained.

City Manager Nick Villano said the people who remained under the bridge seemed intent on staying there. Yet, those who tried to find them better homes said they have no doubt that they made their best effort.

"I believe that the coalition, working with Clifton, did everything possible to give all the homeless people as much of an opportunity to get to a shelter or otherwise get indoors before today," said Jeff Wild, executive director of the New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness. "Compared to how it's been handled elsewhere, this is a model of how it should be done, actually."

Clifton has said the encampment was a public health hazard that had sparked sanitation complaints by Botany Village business owners and needed to be removed. But officials wanted to convince inhabitants of the camp to move into shelters before tearing it down.

Over the past few weeks, Wild said he visited the encampment several times, once with a Spanish-speaking police officer and another time with Clifton Councilwoman Lauren Murphy. They passed out notices about the cleanup and talked about opportunities, including a Paterson shelter and a transitional program at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center.

Murphy said for the most part, she was met with no response.

"They didn't really say they wouldn't go, but they wouldn't respond the three times I tried to talk to them," she said. "We gave them fliers, information, told them about bus tickets to get to Home Depot where they could try to find work. I guess they are either in denial, thought it wasn't going to happen, or when it happened, they'd figure it out then."

There was one success story: Murphy and a volunteer with the Jericho Road shelter in Paterson convinced a man to take a bed there a few weeks ago. The man has since left the shelter to check himself into a hospital to deal with a problem, a friend of the man told Murphy.

"I feel very comfortable the city of Clifton did everything possible to give them ample time to move or go somewhere safer," Murphy said.

The city has no plans to close off the area, but Villano said he would periodically check up on it so a new encampment doesn't sprout up.

Wild, with the homelessness coalition, commended the city for its "compassionate" approach to the problem, noting that other municipalities have bulldozed away homeless camps without notice. Three years ago, Paterson police and firefighters abruptly broke up a homeless encampment on the banks of the Passaic River, evicting people who had lived there for years.

Clifton delayed dismantling the Ackerman Avenue bridge camp at least three times but refused a fourth request by Wild late last week.

Wild said some of the men who lived under the bridge, who are likely illegal immigrants, might not have wanted to go to a shelter out of fear. But he planned to return there Monday night – to offer anyone who might go back one last chance for refuge.

"The reality may not kick in until it becomes real," Wild said.

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