

Brockton's homeless population says the city treats them poorly. That's not what the city says

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The Enterprise

Jan. 31, 2024 11:24 a.m.

BROCKTON — A 30-year-old Brockton native was living on the streets of downtown Brockton for roughly one month after being discharged from Saint Elizabeth's Medical Center in the Brighton neighborhood of Boston, he said.

The man, who asked his name not be used to protect his privacy and for fear of retaliation, spent two months in the hospital getting treatment for drug addiction and endocarditis, a bacterial heart infection, he said.

Upon discharge in late December, the hospital sent him to stay at Father Bill's homeless shelter either in Quincy or Brockton. He chose to go to Brockton, where he grew up and his mother still lives. But when he arrived, he said the shelter was overcrowded and struggled with bed bugs.

Father Bill's new 24-hour homeless resource center under construction on Manley Street isn't planned to open until the end of 2024. Until then, the overnight emergency MainSpring shelter is one of the only places where Brockton's homeless population can find a bed.

So, he left and started spending his nights underneath the MBTA commuter rail bridges downtown, which are owned by the Commonwealth.

"I didn't get a bed anywhere," he said. "[This is] the environment you're supposed to get away from...It's not a place that'd be suitable for me to get clean."

Since mid-December, The Enterprise spoke to six individuals experiencing homelessness in the area on three different days, who declined to provide their names to protect their privacy. They said that almost every day, they wake up to employees from Brockton's Department of Public Works (DPW) or Brockton Police (BPD) telling them to move out of the area.

"It would be nice of them to have sympathy," the 30-year-old Brockton native who was recently discharged from Saint Elizabeth's said. "It's not illegal for us to be down here."

As early as March 2023, four more individuals living on the streets at various times recounted very similar instances with DPW employees.

Challenges keeping the city clean

DPW Commissioner Pat Hill's team is tasked with cleaning up public land across the city. When they receive calls to service underneath the bridges, the area must be cleared before they can start cleaning.

"We clean the downtown kind of religiously, almost daily," Hill said.

Along with needles and trash scattered around the streets of Brockton's downtown neighborhood, residents have raised concerns about urine and human feces found on private and public property in the area and Brockton's Director of Social Services Jazmine Bradsher recently said that public bathrooms could become an "option within a few months.

Aggressive or positive interactions?

The unhoused residents told The Enterprise city employees can be aggressive when moving them along, often swearing at them and throwing away blankets, shoes or other possessions.

One woman said a DPW staff member threw away her shoes while she was asleep, while one man said they have ripped blankets off his body.

But city officials painted a very different picture.

"I've never seen anybody take anybody's shoes. I've never seen anybody take anybody's blankets. And most of the time the interaction is positive," Hill said. "We're not the bad guys, we're just trying to keep it clean."

Mayor Robert Sullivan said in a written statement to The Enterprise, "I am the mayor of all residents in the City of Brockton, including the unhoused population. As we work toward finding a solution for the increasing number of individuals experiencing homelessness, something many cities across the United States are facing, we will continue to support this population in a way that is respectful and causes the least amount of disruption for the surrounding residents and business owners."

Here's what the city says

According to Hill, the policy for the DPW and the BPD recently changed, and those workers no longer interact with Brockton's homeless population directly. Now, before they go in to clean, the city's homelessness task force, led by Bradsher, establishes contact and helps them relocate.

"Anyone found in these spaces are provided with advance notice to vacate the area voluntarily with their belongings to facilitate the cleaning process," said Suzanne McCormack, a mayor's office spokesperson. "More often than not, when DPW crews arrive, the affected areas are generally empty of people."

"It is not the practice of City employees to be disrespectful or aggressive. Quite the opposite, the Brockton Police, DPW Commissioner Hill, and Director of Social Services Jazmine Bradsher have reported that the interactions when servicing this community are respectful and courteous," McCormack said.

Hill said his staff give people sleeping under the bridges time to gather and move their belongings.

“Nobody’s pulling anything off of anybody,” said Hill. “At the end of the day, we’re not trying to take anybody’s stuff. We’re actually just trying to make sure there aren’t any needles or anything that would create a public health hazard.”

What would help?

But several unhoused citizens said the staff don’t typically wait. If somebody’s items are unattended, it’s usually the first to be thrown away, they said.

According to one woman, once DPW arrive there's a limited window of time to grab and relocate their stuff before it'll be tossed in the garbage.

Many people who stay under the bridge said the city could help by bringing trash barrels around the area so they can dispose of trash themselves, which city officials said recently they are working on. Some unhoused people said they'd help clean up the streets if they had access to supplies.

According to state laws, Brockton can't remove anyone for sleeping on public land unless there's an open bed at a shelter for them to relocate to, so stopping the unhoused from staying downtown can be a legal challenge. But city officials said that once cleaning is finished, people can return to the area.

“My staff is certainly not aggressive with them, I mean everybody’s sympathetic to the situation,” Hill said.