

STOP

THE



SWEEPS





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Stop The Sweeps Austin Pushes Back Against Displacement & Camping Ban

Since November, Stop the Sweeps Austin has been fighting the on going displacement of homeless people by City and State forces. A lot has happened and it has been easy to get lost in the details of who is responsible for which sweeps and how this all came to be. For the long version, see our interview on the This Is America podcast.

The short version: On November 4th the city and State began enacting different camping bans enacted by different logics. The city had just passed a revised camping ban, putting some restriction on camping in the city in general while banning camping, sitting, and lying down altogether in the 7 square blocks around the downtown homeless shelter (the ARCH), which overlaps with the central business district and party zones. The Austin Police Department had already planned the eviction of a camp directly across from the shelter, in coordination with a long list of service providers in the area.

On the 4th, this action by the city corresponded with the beginning of sweeps of camps under the overpasses of the highways around town, demanded by the Governor's office and orchestrated by the Department of Transportation (TXDOT), state cops (DPS), and a handful of private contractors who would actually do the labor of throwing people's belongings away (Workquest, EPSI, Relief Enterprise, Pacesetters). Some of us were present when we expected this to begin, but the state shifted its schedule and began later in the day on the other side of town.

Some of us had been visiting the ARCH camp for the previous weeks or otherwise knew people that resided there or near there. On the day of, we organized together and defended a little more than half of the camp from APD and the city trash service. This would not last, cops and trash workers arrived the next night at 4:08 AM and took the rest. Another tent was set up that day and our friend was arrested. The police

continue to buzz around the block harassing people waiting for services or community. Another friend was brutally arrested for filming these interactions.

Since the 4th, we have maintained our contact with friends at the ARCH and have been organizing to be present at the persistent State run sweeps of the underpasses. We have both tried to support the residents as they relocate temporarily, and to delay and disrupt the activity of the cops, supervisors and workers. We also film extensively, putting pressure on the work crew in the moment and gathering footage to use later.

There have been some successes and some disheartening failures. After we had been able to stay legally in the campsites to film slowing a sweep for hours, the state decided to enforce a State Work Zone law which allowed them to trespass us from the area. We were pushed to the sidelines without the forces to resist this order. However as the State work crew continued through town, the terrain changed and we were able to use time and persistence to our advantage. Supervisors were visibly demoralized, at least one gave a threat of bodily harm. They spent longer and longer on the phone with their supervisors. Moral sank.

This week, we came with more supporters and an understanding of our power. They did not attempt to issue or enforce the Work Zone order until the very end, though there were more DPS present than before. More physical threats were issued by the work crew, though it was clear to even them they could do nothing of the sort.

When the crews got downtown, the residents scramble to relocate began, but as some tents went down, one went up – without plans to voluntarily comply. One resident excitedly began to livestream cheering them on! In the end, the arrest was made and we are currently anticipating our friend's release. Photos and a report from this altercation began to go viral on Facebook, initiated by an opposition Facebook group, ironically all this caught the attention of the algorithm! As Zuckerberg says: It is good to be attacked by the enemy.

This is all in the face of a growing mood of austerity, with the city and state governments cutting services for housing and mental illness for many years. Services are much more likely to be provided by NGO's, many of whom receive some state money and have to find the rest elsewhere. Even the city is looking to places like the Bloomberg Foundation for money, spending most of a recent grant studying data collection on homeless individuals to be stored in perpetuity on the blockchain. This money spent studying surveillance technologies, and paying the professionals that worked on it goes hand in hand with the mentality of the sweeps, that homelessness is not to be ended and that people suffering it need to be controlled.

The Governor in an attempt to shield himself from this critique, almost a month ago announced a temporary housing solution for people displaced from the underpasses, something both TXDOT and the haters online will not let people forget. He unlocked an abandoned TXDOT facility on the far edge of town, housing people in truck shelters on a 5 acre brownfield lot.

People are sleeping two or three to a shelter and have found their way out there despite there being extremely limited (at first just one way) bus service and no sidewalks along the access road to the highway in lies next to. There are no showers, laundry, medical care or social workers. In some cases the roofs over the shelters are incomplete and people have had to make do during the winter rains. There is, however, plenty of barbed wire and State cops. In response to being told by a resident that the place was a concentration camp, the lone operative from Texas Emergency Management, operated by the Forest Service of Texas A&M told him, "You're free to leave!" Some freedom.



Timeline of Events

NOVEMBER 5, 2019

At 4:08 this morning APD and Austin Resource Recovery displaced the ARCH Camp. They roused sleeping campers and stole their belongings with the orange claw pictured below. Campers grabbed what they could and moved across the street.

Yesterday, we asked “where are the social workers”? On that note, APD released this statement yesterday:

“Regarding today’s cleanups around the ARCH, this was a pre-planned initiative called ‘Guided Path’ that has been in the works for a few weeks. It was coordinated with the COA Homeless Strategy Office, Front Steps, Integral Care, and ECHO to name a few.”

Sleepers were told if they set back up they would be cited and arrested.

We’re out here this morning to get our sleep back.

NOVEMBER 7, 2019

ALERT: Austin Chamber of Commerce unveils concentration camp for the homeless.

Today, a coalition including the Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Austin Alliance will unveil a new “innovative” approach to addressing homelessness.

Their solution: a large tent structure to house folks in Montopolis. After terrorizing and displacing the city’s unhoused resident, all these business interests have to offer is a city-built tent city clustered in one location.

This is not a solution, it’s a concentration camp. The nation rightly decried the Tornillo tent city used to house migrant children near El Paso as inhumane conditions reminiscent of concentration camps. Now, this template

of solutions is being applied to homelessness. Rather than provide housing and give people the stability, resources, and freedom to survive while they remain on the streets, the city is displacing them and attempting to force them into out of the way enclosures where they can be more easily surveilled and controlled, made invisible and disposed of.

While Austin businesses can do this, we wonder where the \$250,000 allocated in Prop A housing money went. Was it embezzled, whether by the city or the non-profit industrial complex? Or do they just not care to use it to provide actual, reliable housing? Where is the funding for permanent homes, emergency housing vouchers, and supportive services?

We don’t trust the same forces which have produced mass displacement to solve the problem. The city and its business interests have fueled the fires of gentrification, rising rents, and artificial housing scarcity. There are poor people in Austin because the city and businesses steal land and kill people for profit. Austin’s long history of displacement extends to the racist origins of the city—from slavery to the displacement of freedmen’s colonies and the segregation of Austin in the early 1900s.

This solves nothing. It will not meet everyone’s needs. Those who don’t go to those facility after being displaced from downtown or the overpasses will be blamed for not using an inhumane, inadequate service. This is a PR stunt, not a solution.

Stop the sweeps and give us housing or shut up.

NOVEMBER 7, 2019

We have something in common with the Austin Chamber of Commerce and Governor Abbot—we all know there is no where to left to go.

The City, Travis County (Integral Care), and the Nonprofits coordinated to evict the ARCH encampment and enforce the 7 square block exclusion zone downtown. The Governor rallied DPS, TXDOT and an array of contractors to clear the camps under the freeways one by one. Citizen vigilantes encounter and

report shelters found in the Greenbelt and City Parks.

Enter the Chamber, this morning proposing the 300 bunk “Sprung” shelter to be located within a mile from Downtown, pictured above. Notice anything missing? They are trying to raise 14 million dollars to build, staff and guard this windowless prison for the next two years. Until this is built, the governor, happy to fill the gap, will allow camping guarded by DPS on a lot in East Austin.

How will these shelters fill? Who would go willingly into these inhuman spaces? Perhaps it will look like a justice system diversion “provision of resources”. Caught camping? Go to the “shelter” instead of paying your ticket. Let out of jail or the hospital with nowhere to go? First stop, Sprung. There are lots of people looking for resolution after this weeks purge. Maybe they’ll end up here not knowing where else to go.

DECEMBER 16, 2019

Today, December 16, unhoused residents of Austin continued their resistance against the weekly inhumane sweeps. Under I-35, two separate individuals in two separate locations staged sit-ins, refusing to comply with the sweeps. While one of these individuals eventually backed off and moved, the other was eventually arrested by the combined forces of DPS and APD.

Today’s events come after an individual resisted in a similar fashion last week, leading to the first arrest carried out during the sweeps. It appears that the spirit of resistance, sense of power, and frustration with the mundane suffering the State inflicts is growing.

Today’s events also highlighted the intense risks to health and safety posed by the sweeps. One individual under Packsaddle suffered from a seizure and was taken away by EMS. The constant stress of these sweeps is a major psychological and physical stressor for the city’s unhoused residents.

DECEMBER 31, 2019

The Pacesetter workers threw his tent away. And dragged his mattress right behind. T was standing, watching them, verbally claiming his property. The notice that the mattress was not abandoned was still there. This worker liked to believe he was helping the folks at the underpasses. He was often the first to make contact, sometimes remembering a name. At this underpass he hadn’t ordered people to drag their belongings across the road immediately, but let things stand on the side walk. Still he dragged the mattress, still he laughed with his buddies when they threw the tent away.

T had suffered strokes and seizures in the past several weeks, and would have to start all over.

Not too far away another man sat in his wheelchair. He had collapsed his tent so it would be easier to move, but it was still heavy, loaded with bedding. His friends were all busy moving their belongings out of harms way. But he had decided to make a stand and was not moving, did not want us to move it for him. DPS and TXDOT, perhaps sensing his resolve, did not approach him.

A scooter stood in front of them. A big red one. The latest in speculator driven tech trash left on the streets of Austin. The workers stared at first, then looked away. This was not why they were here. They were here to confiscate the belongings of the people with the least. DPS told the residents that their goal was to move everyone to Camp Abbott. Not in handcuffs. The motivator would be the continued trauma of the sweeps.

“Happy new year” - the friendly worker

Thanks to the community members that came out to defend, aid and assist the camps. We are assembling quite a crew.

JANUARY 4TH, 2020

After the city sweep of the East Riverside Encampment just before Christmas, residents were inspired to take their camp back. Now APD is attempting to intimidate and ticket them at

the request of nearby businesses.

Camp residents say that Community Court laborers came through December 21st and gave them very little time to claim belongings before discarding the rest. We've heard that APD was stationed across the street and issued no tickets. It is our belief is that these cleanup operations are a way to continue the camping ban, by intimidating people and trashing their belongings.

After the sweep, residents were forced either into hiding or into very public distress, with several people forced to survive with what remained of their belongings onto the sidewalks in front of businesses. Some of these businesses, like the McDonald's, complained to police about the situation, expecting the police to move them into hiding. We learned this week, that they have continued to complain even as people moved back across the street to the median. The median meets all of the guidelines to be a legal campground. So many feet from a business, outside of the downtown exclusion zone, etc.

This has not kept Officer Yarger of APD (badge AP6499) from repeatedly harassing and bullying residents. We have heard he escalates confrontations, yelling and threatening people with arrest or to steal their personal belongings. Residents say he has denied multiple requests for a supervisor and ultimately issued a ticket, citing "Camping in a Public Area".

Yarger acts under color of law, taking advantage of the fact that these residents are not likely to have adequate legal counsel. He denies the relevance of the recent Supreme Court rulings on homelessness acting on behalf of those like McDonald's who want people pushed from public view.

It is up to all of us to defend our claims to the world we all inhabit and share, to stand up to those who would keep it for themselves.

Stay tuned for actions supporting these residents.

JANUARY 8TH, 2020

We're just following orders

That was the TXDOT supervisor's response when someone asked him how he felt about hurting vulnerable people during the sweeps this week

It was the DPS officer's response too when asked what was the point of them being there. They didn't really have a good sense of why they were there or the benefits of the sweeps. They continued to peddle misinformation about the "solution" of camp Abbott-claiming it has showers (in reality, a hose) and food servings (they stopped those). They didn't know how much longer they'll be following these orders

Did their orders include waking a woman up and giving her just 10 minutes to get her stuff and move? Do you think any of them move with that sort of haste upon just waking up-would you?

Did the orders include harassing a man with a concussion into moving his tent, even though there was basically no trash under or around it?

Did the orders specify that corporate owned electric scooters strewn on the sidewalk are to be ignored, and that "trash" only includes things associated with our house less neighbors?

Did their orders direct them to mock and yell at someone who suffered an arrest at their hands, for refusing the inhumanity of their sweeps?

This week, as in others, we're reminded of the mundane brutality of the sweeps. A brutality made evident in a "clean-up" backed up with batons, tasers, guns, handcuffs, and jail cells. Made evident in panic attacks, strokes, seizures, and aggravation triggered every week by these crews.

"Following orders" is an admission of complicity, not an exoneration. We're not expecting ethical purity-this deeply violent world doesn't give any of us that option. But

don't pretend that you have no agency over your active participation in that violence. And if there's such a thing as justice in this world, you will have to reckon with the blood on your hands.

To our supporters—get in contact if you wish to help stop the sweeps. We need people to come bear witness and intervene each week, and we have plenty of other ways you can support.

JANUARY 19TH, 2020

On the morning of January 18th, Stop the Sweeps went on the offensive against the displacement of our unhoused neighbors. With an energetic crowd of around 40 supporters, we marched with banners, whistles, posters, and chalk on the home of Fred Weber, Jr, the CEO of WorkQuest.

WorkQuest is the non-profit contractor in charge of managing Texas' State Use Program, which matches local & state government labor needs with companies that employ people with disabilities. Under this authority, WorkQuest has facilitated the creation of contracts between the City of Austin & Relief Enterprise, and between TXDoT and EPSI, to provide work crews to carry out the sweeps of encampments under the overpasses. Since WorkQuest lies at the center of this web of bureaucracy and sub-contractors, we decided to pressure them in pushing the demand to end the contracts and the sweeps. Additionally, we wanted to highlight the hypocrisy of a non-profit claiming to serve people with disabilities, while using those people to displace unhoused people, which includes some of the most vulnerable people with disabilities in our society.

We arrived at the northwest Austin home of CEO Fred Weber, who makes over \$350,000 per year, to deliver our demands after WorkQuest seemingly ignored our call in campaigns. While Fred himself was not home, we made clear to his wife our demands and our intention to continue this struggle to stop the sweeps. During the demonstration, some supporters distributed flyers to many of their neighbors explaining why we were making such a ruckus. For about an hour, we stood there chanting slogans like "No Hate, No Fear, Human

Beings Can't Be Cleared," and "Drop the Contract." At points we blasted sirens, air horns, whistles, and vuvuzelas. Some supporters chalked messages on the sidewalk, while others set up a tent on the lawn of the house.

About 40 minutes into our rally the police showed up. While they ignored us for the most part, they swiftly took down the tent in an illustrative, poetically ironic moment. Slowly, more cops trickled in until there were about 5 cars and the officers blocking off on direction of the street. Shortly after that, we marched away without any incidents.

We took this action to make clear that we will not simply play catch up to the State's game. While we continue to be present at the weekly sweeps and assist those on the ground, we will also be building forces and strategizing to bring the fight to the offices and homes of those facilitating displacement. This was a warning shot. WorkQuest can choose to heed it and break the contract while refusing to fulfill future contracts for sweeps. Or they can ignore it, in which case we will be back.





Statement of principles

BACKGROUND

Stop the Sweeps is a network composed of community members, many housed and others unhoused. Some of us have worked in organizing with the unhoused for years, while others of us are new to this struggle but bring experiences from other forms of anti-racist, anti-carceral, and anti-oppression struggles. We coalesced as a network at the beginning of November out of crews that had been regularly present at the ARCH in anticipation of sweeps of the camp there, where we kept watch and had connections with unhoused friends on the ground.

STOP THE SWEEPS AIMS TO SPREAD & SUPPORT DIRECT ACTION, SELF-ORGANIZATION, AND THE RESISTANCE OF THOSE OPPRESSED BY THE GOVERNMENT.

From our various organizing backgrounds, our networks holds an emphasis on supporting direct action, self-organization, and resistance beyond the mere confines of reformist politicking. While legislative efforts may have their place, we are more focused on building a material force capable of fighting for, winning, and defending any gains achieved. We mobilized people with this mindset at the beginning of November, and were able to successfully hold off the City's sweep of the ARCH camp for a day. We continue to support those trying to confront and stop the sweeps, and are developing strategies to go on the offensive against the institutions responsible for displacement through "cleanups." While our network is made up of people with varying ideas about different tactics, some common themes of our work include:

Organizing autonomously, setting our own terms without compromise: Our work and strategy is determined on our own terms, in conversations with those we have built relations with. We do not limit our strategy or demands based on what politicians, corporations, and sellouts tell us is "reasonable" or "pragmatic." We demand and fight for what is needed, on our own terms, instead of compromising with the same



institutions responsible for our current crisis.

The cops don't keep us safe, we keep us safe: We don't work with the police. We oppose the continued interference of the police in the lives of our unhoused neighbors. We don't demand nicer or more involved policing, but alternative services, resources, and institutions to the police. Our organizing, protests, and direct action are kept safe by us and our allies, not through collaboration or obedience to the police.

WE ARE NOT A GROUP THAT CRAFTS POLICY OR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS; WE ARE A GROUP WITH VISIONS WE WILL NOT COMPROMISE ON

While we are internally diverse in terms of desires, demands, and hopes, we agree on some unifying themes:

No sweeps, no criminalization, no coercion: We want an end to the displacement of our unhoused neighbors, whether through police harassment or sweeps disguised as "clean-ups." We want an end to the criminalization of the status of houselessness, whether enacted explicitly through camping bans and exclusion zones or implicitly through arrests and citations legitimized under "quality of life" crimes, the War on Drugs, the protection of business interests, or "for our own safety".

Give us what we need: We want a world where our unhoused neighbors can get meaningful access to necessities and services. This includes but is not limited to mental and physical health services, voluntary sanitation services and interactions with the State, and housing which is safe, accessible, and affordable.

Everything for everyone: We want a world where the conditions and things necessary for people to thrive—such as freedom, food, care, shelter, and community—are available to all, not hoarded as commodities for the benefit of a powerful ruling class.

WE ARE AGAINST THE SWEEPS, POLICE HARASSMENT, CONCENTRATION CAMPS, GENTRIFICATION, AND THE WORLD THAT PRODUCED THEM

We aim to create interventions—analytical, rhetorical, and tactical—that highlight the role of the State and the economic system in producing the crisis of houselessness, and that push back against these systems to open space for dignified lives. Stop the Sweeps is most directly focused on combatting the various City and State sweeps, police harassment, and inhumane alternative shelter systems used to displace and erase our unhoused neighbors. In our analysis of the problem, which varies somewhat from person to person within our network, our common unifying ideas are:

Houselessness is a symptom of a society built upon layers of displacement and the commodification of basic needs: Houselessness is an endemic condition of a society that treats necessities such as housing as commodities to make profits off of, rather than social goods for all. The rise in Austin's houseless population is, as in other cities, a symptom of the combined effects of austerity measures which have obliterated social services and safety nets, the rapid rise of rents and the effects of gentrification on working class communities, and an economy which locks people into under-paying jobs without labor protections, precarious employment, or constant un- or underemployment. Growing houselessness is the flip side to Austin's boom as a city for the professional and entrepreneurial sectors, where the repression of the City's dispossessed and exploited is carried out to secure a future for tech, entertainment, and consumer industries. These phenomena are not new, but mutations and afterlives of the multi-century histories of displacement that Austin is built upon—from the expulsion of the indigenous Coahuiltecan, Comanche, and Apache peoples, to slavery and the post-Reconstruction displacement of freedmen's colonies and the segregation of Austin.

Together, we build a world worth living in: the power to build a world with a dignified life for all will come primarily through building our own, collective capacities to act together, to set our own agendas in fighting against a world built on displacement, dispossession, and exploitation.

**WE ARE NEITHER REPRESENTATIVES NOR LEADERS OF THE UNHOUSED,
BUT A NETWORK OFFERING SKILLS, EXPERIENCES, AND RESOURCES**

We work closely with our unhoused organizers and emphasize building connections with other unhoused Austinites affected by the sweeps. We do not claim to speak for the unhoused nor do we claim to be directly organizing them. Rather, our network is focused on how we can bring our various experiences, skills, and resources to the table in assisting unhoused Austinites in resisting and self-organizing. This includes circulating ideas about strategies and tactics, offering material support for people who have lost items such as tents and sleeping materials, connecting folks with legal support, know your rights & copwatch trainings, and more. To the degree we can, we try to amplify the perspectives and experiences of those we meet who are affected by the sweeps and the displacement of the unhoused. Furthermore, we don't claim ownership or leadership around the fight against displacement, sweeps, or the various struggles and needs of the unhoused. We are one network that invites others to engage us, but we hope to see other crews form and fulfill other needs and dimensions of this struggle.

STOP THE SWEEPS IS A FLUID AND EXPANDING NETWORK

As a network of organizers, our work and individual commitments are very fluid. While there are many fronts to our struggle—from the fight against the overpass sweeps, to supporting the residents of Camp Abbott, to working with friends at the ARCH—some of us move between these fronts and different roles very fluidly, while others dedicate themselves to specific aspects of these struggles. Our goal is to keep expanding this network, so that any folks doing some form of work in this fight can be connected, coordinating, and supporting each other's efforts. This structure also influences some of our organizing style and decisions:

Give what you can, respect each other's autonomy, and take initiative: There are not formalized leadership roles in our network. This is, in part, due to the constantly fluctuating nature of this fight. Instead, we make decisions col-

lectively to the degree that is possible, while respecting individual autonomy and initiative within the group. We don't seek to impose decisions or directives on to each other, but to build a network that maximizes our ability to actualize our desires and capacities to act. We invite people to contribute what they can.

Emphasize trust & collaboration over rhetoric & purity: We build relationships with people based on trust, shared tactical sensibilities, and ability to work together.





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