

## **DRAFT 4** Outreach Phone Call Messages + Frequently Asked Questions

### **Key messages:**

- The unauthorized encampment at Geri Field was not approved by the City and will not continue. Steps to end this camp are underway.
- Reasonable alternatives for shelter for most people staying at Geri are immediately available.
- Many staying at Geri are the part of the most difficult-to-serve, chronic homeless population, requiring special care for their complex and significant challenges such as addiction, aggression, and mental health issues.
- The camp environment, with few rules or boundaries, presents serious public health and safety hazards. There have been several high-profile incidents, increased 911 calls and reports of violence, drug use and other illegal activities in the area, and lack of COVID-19 precautions.
- The site has been damaged and has a great deal of refuse, including feces and needles, requiring clean-up and repairs before it will be ready for public use and scheduled spring recreation activities.
- We have explored many avenues for finding ways for the City to allow an encampment and for connecting camp residents to our community's many programs and facilities. We have nearly exhausted these efforts.
- Our team has resumed steps to end this camp:
  - This week (*March 9*) we will again provide notice that the encampment is not authorized and request that campers voluntarily leave.
  - We have arranged for homelessness service providers to gather nearby to offer services and resources for three consecutive days (*9a-Noon, March 10, 11, 12*)
  - Following these efforts, we will assess the situation and (*March 16*) City crews (*PW and Parks*) will remove any belongings that remain and begin clean-up and repairs.
- Our goal is to avoid a large law enforcement response while disbanding this camp. We urge campers to re-connect with services and leave on their own. If these efforts are not successful, or if clean-up crews are confronted with violence, we may reluctantly need to request law enforcement assistance. This will be a last resort.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Why did the City allow this encampment?

- The City did not sanction this camp and did not assist in its creation.
- It is an unauthorized, unpermitted, illegal encampment, set up by some residents and volunteers who were involved with the encampment at City Hall.
- Overnight camping in any City parks is not allowed by City municipal code without a permit.

### Who is residing at Geri Field?

- According to service providers with direct experience with many of the individuals, most of the camp residents are members of the chronic unsheltered, which is the most difficult-to-serve homeless population. Many of the chronic unsheltered population have complex and significant challenges such as addiction, aggression, and mental health issues, which hinder their ability to succeed in group settings or in social service programs.

### Why can't the City host a *no-barrier* encampment?

- ***No-barrier housing*** is a “harm reduction” model in which residents are not restricted from drug and alcohol use, very few rules are established regarding behavior, and aggressive behavior is often left to the police.
- As barriers are lowered or eliminated, risks to public safety increase significantly. Credentialed individuals with experience working with the chronic unsheltered are needed to ensure that encampment residents and the community in general are safe.
- City ordinances currently allow for ***very-low barrier*** encampments, provided that credentialed professionals with experience working with the chronic unsheltered are on-site.
- The City can act as a funder for ***very-low barrier*** encampments and has offered to do so. A process exists for organizations to apply for funding to support encampments and other programs.

### Where will the campers at Geri Field go?

- Reasonable alternatives for shelter are immediately available, including Base Camp and other programs, and we hope campers will use those services. Others may return to dispersed small encampments located throughout our community. Some who have no ties to Bellingham will move on to other communities.
- Most are eligible for Base Camp services if they can follow the basic behavioral rules in place to protect the health and safety of all shelter users.
- Base Camp offers rapid COVID-19 screening at any time of day. Anyone in need of shelter is welcome to walk up to Base Camp or to call ahead and schedule an appointment for screening. If the COVID test is negative, most will be admitted on the spot. If the test is positive, they will work with the individual and the Whatcom County Health Department to connect them with the Isolation and Quarantine Facility.

### Have 911 calls and criminal activity increased due to this encampment?

- Calls for law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services have increased because of actual and perceived issues with the camp.
- There has been an increase in requests for police presence by surrounding businesses and residents, which comprise a lot of the increased calls.
- High profile incidents have included propane tank explosions that caused tent fires, a camper injured when hit with a brick by another camper, and an assault on 11-year-old girl when leaving a business near the encampment.

- Public nuisance and property crimes have increased slightly in this area when compared to same time last year.

#### **What will happen if people do not leave the Geri camp?**

- The City Hall encampment required an extensive law enforcement response that is not likely to be necessary at Geri Field. The circumstances at these two locations are very different.
- If voluntary compliance is not successful and people refuse to leave, or if there are people confronting the clean-up effort or endangering the safety of City crews, law enforcement may be asked to respond. This will be a last resort.
- If such a response becomes necessary officers may be seen in full gear, as they must be properly prepared and equipped to perform their duties safely and effectively.

#### **Why has the City delayed removing the Geri Field encampment?**

- City officials announced it was not authorized and illegal as soon as it was created on January 28.
- Formal legal notice to vacate was posted on February 2, giving a February 5 deadline.
- Severe weather delayed initial City action.
- Action was further delayed while the City Council considered a proposal made by community members to allow encampments on City property. The proposal was not advanced out of Council committee at the Feb. 22 meeting. Planning to engage services and end the encampment resumed immediately.
- Over recent months, City officials have explored many avenues for finding ways to allow an encampment and for connecting residents to our community's many programs and facilities. We have nearly exhausted these efforts.

#### **What is the current situation at Geri Field? (3/6/21):**

- Observers estimate **xxx** people are residing there. The site appears to contain many abandoned tents and discarded belongings.
- Camp residents and volunteers continue to receive donations from well-meaning community members, further enabling a difficult situation.
- The site has been damaged extensively including breaking into the restroom building, tampering with power supply, burning in multiple locations, and has extensive refuse including feces and needles.
- Police calls for service within the encampment are being evaluated on a case-by-case basis, as officers have been met with interference and hostility when they try to respond.
- Homeless service agencies are unwilling to enter the site to serve the campers due to safety concerns and hostility directed toward them.
- Agencies are willing to make themselves available at a nearby location and plans to do so are scheduled, though agency representatives question whether this will be effective.
- Legitimate public uses of the field require it be cleared as soon as possible to allow time for repairs and restoration. Recreational uses and scheduled activities will begin as soon as the camp is cleared and the area is made safe.

#### **Who is organizing the camp at Geri Field?**

- The camp is said to be self-run by residents with the assistance of volunteers and donated supplies.
- Some volunteers are affiliated with the BOP (Bellingham Occupied Protest) Mutual Aid group, which promotes protests (or "black bloc" "strikes") that have resulted in vandalism to public buildings and

private homes, acts of intimidation that appear to use the issue of homelessness to further broader social causes. **Their demands, as stated on social media and in City Council public comment periods, include:**

- Drop all charges, including felony assault charges, against protestors arrested at the removal of the illegal camp at City Hall and the Library.
- Provide permanent, *no-barrier* housing for all.
- Permanent ban on encampment sweeps.
- “Defund” or “abolish” the police.

**What is the Bellingham Police Department’s role in responding to calls within the Geri Field camp and in disbanding it?**

- Service decisions for law enforcement calls about activities within the camp are made by Bellingham Police, based on type and severity of the incident, time of day, and number of officers available to safely enter the encampment, all intended to protect the safety of all -- camp residents, volunteers, officers, members of the public.
- Police serve a support role, not a decision-making role, on when to clear the encampment and in the clean-up process. The decision to disband the Geri Field camp is made by the City administration based on applicable laws and public health and safety guidance.

**What has been the biggest challenge to serving the homeless population this winter?**

- According to area homeless services providers, the top challenge to serving the homeless population this winter has been the “Camp 210” encampments at City Hall and Geri Field. These encampments have:
  - Disconnected individuals from services, medications, and caseworkers, and created an atmosphere with no rules or boundaries, reversing the progress of many clients toward overcoming personal struggles and obstacles.
  - Undermined the legitimacy of an agreed-upon county-wide strategy and the multiple agencies that serve this population every day.
  - Reduced the use of indoor, fully staffed, and operated shelters, resulting in those services being underutilized.
  - Violated CDC guidelines for social distancing and avoiding groups.
- While Camp 210 increased community awareness of and support for the needs of people experiencing homelessness, this attention has come at a cost, including the problems listed above and serious health and safety concerns.

### **What is the City doing about homelessness?**

- Bellingham is a compassionate and caring community, evidenced in many ways including by strong voter approval of the most recent Home Fund housing levy.
- The City is doing more than ever, investing millions every year to address homelessness.
  - The City spends approximately \$5 million per year on contracts with partners who provide services to help either prevent or respond to homelessness.
  - The Whatcom County Health Department contributes an equivalent amount each year, for a total of about \$10 million per year county-wide.
- The City and County are working simultaneously to provide permanent housing solutions, respond to the need for emergency shelter, and address the root causes of homelessness.
- More information:
  - [Homelessness FAQs Winter 2021](#)
  - [Addressing Homelessness](#)