

DRAFT 2 Outreach Phone Call Outline

Purpose: To reach out to key community members to informally share facts about the illegal encampment at Geri Field and the City's intent to address its growing public health and safety concerns.

Timing: The City is approaching a point where alternatives for shelter by those camping at Geri Field have been rejected or ignored and the risk to public of continuing the encampment has reached a point that warrants imminent City action.

Key Points:

- **Illegal, unpermitted encampment.** Some residents and volunteers involved with the encampment at City Hall set up an encampment in the lower Geri Field parking lot in the Civic Athletic Complex. Overnight camping in City parks is not allowed by City municipal code without a permit. Based on the lack of any observable structure or rules by this group both at City Hall and at Geri to date, the "no barrier" site is unsafe and a public health and safety hazard. Observed unsafe behaviors include violence, drug/alcohol use, illegal activities, lack of social distancing or mask use. Without significant changes and a [credentialed service provider/manager](#), it would not be possible for the City to issue a permit to legally use this or any other site.
- **Who is camping at Geri Field?** According to service providers with direct experience with many of the individuals at Geri, most of the actual campers (not the organizers who also camp there) are members of the chronic unsheltered, [the most difficult to serve population](#). Many of these campers 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.
- **Who is organizing the unsheltered at Geri Field?** Organizers [affiliated with the BOP \(Bellingham Occupied Protest\) Mutual Aid group](#). These groups are responsible for promoting protests (or "black bloc" "strikes") that have resulted in vandalism to public buildings and Mayor Fleetwood's home. Their demands (taken from their [social media pages](#)) currently are to:
 - 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 *no-barrier* housing?** 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. City ordinances currently allow for a very-low barrier encampments provided credentialed professionals with experience working with the chronic unsheltered are on-site. Without [such](#) oversight, the risk to residents and the community at large is too great [for the City to host or encourage no-barrier encampments](#).
- **Why can't the City host a no-barrier encampment?**
 - The City does not have the specialized expertise to support such an encampment. 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. The City can act as a funder for such an encampment and has offered to do so. A process exists where organizations can apply for funding to support encampments and other programs.

- **Reasonable alternatives for shelter are immediately available.** Base Camp now has the capacity to offer 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, the person 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.

- **Where are the campers at Geri Field supposed to go?** Some may return to Base Camp or other programs. It is important to note that all of the campers can use Base Camp if they can follow the basic behavioral rules in place to protect the safety of other shelter users. Others will return to dispersed small encampments located throughout our community. Some who have no ties to Bellingham will move on to other communities.

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

- According to area homeless services providers, the top challenges to serving the homeless population this winter have been encampments at City Hall and Geri Field. These encampments have:
 - Disconnected individuals from services, medication 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 and support for the homeless populations, this attention has come at a great cost, including the problems listed above and consistent health and safety concerns.

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

- City officials noted it was illegal and unpermitted as soon as it was created on Jan. 28.
- Formal legal notice to vacate was posted on February 2, giving a February 5 deadline.
- We have wanted to exhaust every avenue of getting the camp residents into one of our community's many programs or facilities.
- A severe weather forecast delayed initial City action.
- Action was then further delayed while 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. Activities to engage services and end the encampment resumed immediately.

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

- We are doing more than ever. We are a compassionate and caring community that invests millions to address homelessness every year.
 - 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.

- **Current situation:**

- Geri Field continues to receive donations from well-meaning public, further enabling a difficult situation.
- Encampment organizers include both campers and volunteers
- High profile incidents include an assault on 11-year-old girl, propane tank explosion/tent fires, (other?)
- Reports of illegal activity in the area have increased (fact check/Almer email threads)
- The site has been damaged extensively including breaking into restroom building, tampering with power supply, burning in multiple locations, and extensive refuse including feces and needles in the adjacent field.
- Agencies are unwilling to enter the site to serve the campers due to safety and hostility.
- Agencies may be willing to make themselves available at a nearby location but do not think outreach would be effective at this time.
- Legitimate uses of the field by the public require it be cleared as soon as possible to allow time for restoration and ensure safety during recreational uses scheduled to begin imminently.