

City planning to schedule homeless site cleanup visits

By Vianna Davila

STAFF WRITER

Starting this fall, city officials plan to do outreach at 12 homeless encampments scattered across the city, helping to bring services to the camp's residents but also cleaning up the sites.

While the city and Haven for Hope have previously done this kind of outreach, those efforts are usually in response to community complaints. Often, the people living in the camps had no idea officials

were coming, said Edward Gonzales, assistant director of the city's Department of Human Services.

Now the city plans to schedule the visits, starting in October when the new fiscal year begins, Gonzales

said. Residents will have warning before the city cleans up each site and will have time to move their belongings.

The plan was discussed Wednesday at a meeting of the City Council Public Safety Committee, part of an ongoing discussion about how to address homelessness.

Officials identified many of the encampments of homeless people while doing a point-in-time count of the homeless population in January, said Melody Woosley, the city's Department of Human Services director.

At that time, there were 2,743 homeless peo-

S.A. is increasing outreach efforts to homeless people, Police Chief William McManus says.

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ple in the city. Of those, 441 were considered “unsheltered,” living in these encampments that are in drainage ditches, under bridges, in wooded areas or even behind stores.

This number often includes people who are chronically homeless, Woosley said, and have spent years on the streets and are often suffering from mental illness and substance abuse.

The city is increasingly trying to focus on doing outreach to these people, because enforcement only goes so far, said Police Chief William McManus, who also addressed the committee Wednesday.

The chief called arresting homeless people for panhandling — a Class C misdemeanor, punishable with a maximum fine of \$500 — “a waste of officers’ time.”

“We’re doing everything we can possibly do from a law enforcement perspective, which (alone) is not going to fix this,” McManus said.

Certain types of panhandling are illegal in San Antonio — a person cannot aggressively panhandle in a public space, and it’s illegal to panhandle within 50 feet of certain areas where the public is considered vulnerable, like a bus stop or ATM, or where the act could interfere with traffic flow, like in the middle of an intersection.

Panhandling arrests were down 6 percent in downtown and 15 percent citywide between Jan. 1 and July 31 this year, compared with the same time period in 2016, McManus said. Trespassing was up downtown and citywide, by 10 percent and 17 percent respectively.

The police department

has also increased its outreach efforts, starting its Integrated Mobile Partners Action Care Team last October. IMPACT includes police officers, paramedics, a clinician from the Center for Health Care Services and someone from Haven for Hope.

The outreach at the various homeless encampments will involve the police department and several other city divisions, including the Solid Waste and Transportation and Capital Improvement departments, that will help clean up the sites. The city plans to give people at the encampments information about Haven for Hope, offering them transportation to Haven or other shelters, Woosley said.

No one will have to leave the sites permanently, Gonzales said. City officials noted Wednesday that some cities have been challenged in court for breaking up such homeless encampments, but San Antonio is “doing a significant amount of outreach before we ever begin to move property,” Woosley said.

Most of those encampments were on the city’s northern half, outside of Loop 410. Two were on

the South Side, along Loop 410 near Interstate 37 and Roosevelt Avenue. All are in public rights-of-way, but the city is working with private property owners whose properties may overlap with homeless camps on public land, Gonzales said.

The city hopes to visit each encampment at least twice. But more sites could be included as the year progresses, Gonzales said.

About \$10.2 million is included in the Department of Human Services’ proposed budget for fiscal year 2018 to address homelessness, Woosley said. That doesn’t include money the city spends on police and fire department-related calls connected to homeless activity.

Several city officials speaking Wednesday said it will take many types of outreach and systemic change to address homelessness.

“From a policy perspective, homelessness is almost all of the social issues we have combined into one,” said District 2 Councilman William “Cruz” Shaw, who chairs the Public Safety Committee.

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