

The Honorable James Kenney
Mayor of Philadelphia
City Hall, Office 215
Philadelphia, PA 19107

June 16, 2020

Dear Mayor Kenney:

A group of Philadelphians experiencing homelessness have made camp on the Parkway. This is a constitutionally-protected way to state grievances and to petition government, using the power of protest to make a collective public statement about the need for this city to properly address homelessness. We write as fellow citizens concerned about the health and social justice of our neighbors, and to urge against any action to break up the peaceful encampment. Instead, we hope the city will take this opportunity to demonstrate that our city and your administration are serious about finally putting our resources into policies that address the social factors undermining health and well-being.

Scattering the residents of the encampment to fend for themselves would be both a public health and humanitarian mistake. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended against clearing encampments during the COVID-19 crisis if individual housing options are not available. People without a safe, sanitary place to live cannot protect themselves or others during this ongoing pandemic. Nor can we recommend or accept forcing people into a choice between homelessness and unsafe congregate stopgaps. COVID-19 makes it that much clearer that congregate shelters are unhealthy environments. And it hardly requires mention that using force to break up a peaceful protest is simply no longer acceptable to the people of this city.

We urge you instead to see this as an opportunity to show that Philadelphia's leaders are hearing the calls for putting our resources and efforts into programs that actually meet the needs of our people. The residents of the encampment are demanding dignified treatment, and attention to their safety, and they are asserting the fundamental right we all share to have a place to live. The National Alliance to End Homelessness is urging immediate provision of private rooms with bathrooms for people who are at high risk for complications from the coronavirus, including people with diabetes, hypertension, chronic lung conditions, and people who are immune compromised — conditions we see at high rates among people who are homeless. Elderly people are also at high risk of COVID-19 complications, and among people who experience homelessness, 55 years of age is considered elderly. Safe, non-congregate housing should be found for everyone in need in this city. Furthermore, the city should commit that no one placed in hotels or other temporary expedencies, will be returned to homelessness. The city should commit that people who exit these facilities will be provided with placement in permanent housing and provided supports where necessary. Philadelphia should develop a clear plan for how it would accomplish this transformation.

We hope that working with the protesters in the encampment can be the first step in a continued dialogue and collective action among partners to ensure permanent, safe, affordable housing for all. We know our city can accomplish great things by working together, and what could be more important than ensuring we all have a home?

Sincerely,

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