



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 15, 2021

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City Continues to Support Safer Options for Residents Experiencing Homelessness, Resumes Enforcement of Restrictions in City Parks and Rights-of-Way

Bloomington, Ind. - Since early December, the City has actively coordinated with community partners to connect people who have been illegally camping in the Seminary Park area with better options for safe shelter. The number of those spending the night in the park or the right-of-way has declined over the last five weeks with that extensive outreach, and enforcement of the rules against overnight camping in City parks and in the right-of-way resumed Thursday, January 14 in order to protect the safety and health of these individuals and the community.

Sleeping outside in the Bloomington winter can be dangerous, and indeed one resident tragically died of exposure at Seminary Park on December 24 despite multiple attempts by representatives of the City and our partners encouraging him to seek available shelter. Sleeping or camping beside a busy road in the public right-of-way also poses serious health and safety risks. With available safe, indoor options, the risks of current weather and safety conditions counsel against overnighting in the Seminary Park area.

The City suspended enforcement of the overnight camping ban in this area over the past five weeks in order to allow ample time for individuals to connect with the available safer alternatives. City staff, collaborating extensively with outreach personnel from several partnering agencies, have spent the last few weeks actively sharing information about and connecting with the agencies that serve those experiencing homelessness.

In early January, the City and its partners notified those staying in the park that the overnight camping restriction would go back into effect on or around January 11, and continued the extensive outreach for safe shelter options.

In early December a substantial daytime presence was often accompanied by tents and other structures remaining overnight in the Seminary Park area, although significant overnight camping was not observed. By mid-December it was estimated that approximately 20 people were beginning to spend the night in the park and environs. By last weekend, a count of overnight campers tallied approximately 15. By Sunday evening, January 10, the number of people camping there was about a dozen, and by Wednesday evening it was reduced to around eight people, all through the extensive case work and individual referrals made by collaborating partners. Safe, indoor overnight shelter options exist at several area locations including Wheeler Mission, with men's and women's options, A Friend's Place, Middle Way House, New Hope for Families, the Monroe County Safe Recovery Shelter focused on those dealing with or at risk of COVID-19 exposure, the STRIDE Center for those experiencing mental health or substance use disorder crises, and new space authorized for emergency use by Beacon just this week. Availability varies from night to night among all of these options, but consistently is far in excess of the dozen or so individuals who lately were camping in the Seminary Park area.

On Thursday afternoon, January 14, City staff notified individuals present that all tents and personal belongings needed to be removed from the sidewalk and right-of-way next to South College Avenue that day. The individuals complied with the request, removing some items to the adjacent park space. They were also notified at that time that overnight camping would not be allowed in the park. At 11 p.m., when the park closes, City staff returned to the park, along with shelter providers offering transportation to safe indoor shelters. At that time, five tents remained in the park, sheltering three people. Two individuals left the park voluntarily and one remained into the night. Staff assisted

in the transportation of the tents and personal effects for overnight storage at the Switchyard Park maintenance building at 1601 South Rogers Street where they may be retrieved today from 8:30 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. and Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. starting next week. Anyone seeking information about available services including emergency shelter may call 211.

The City will continue actively collaborating with the entire community and region, including other governmental entities (Monroe County government and township trustees) service providers, those with lived experience, faith communities, and philanthropic agencies, to identify short- and long-term alternatives for our residents experiencing homelessness. After the Mayor convened gatherings in December, The United Way of Monroe County and the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County are coordinating a working group of stakeholders to develop recommendations to address the ongoing challenges of housing insecurity in our community.