



**OPINION AND  
COMMENTARY**

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GUEST COMMENTARY

## ***New Wichita “camping” ordinance could have deadly consequences for homeless | Opinion***

By Richard Harris *Special to The Wichita Eagle*

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This homeless encampment popped up in an unused parking lot in downtown Wichita just before Christmas last year.  
Travis Heying *The Wichita Eagle*

The Wichita City Council is scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to approve a proposed (anti-)“camping” ordinance — pushed by Mayor Wu and council member Dalton Glasscock — to attack the homeless on multiple fronts.

First, it allows the city to confiscate a homeless person’s tent, bedding and personal belongings in most open place without advance notice, leaving them in the cold with nothing.

It’s a bizarre logic to say you want the homeless to go look for work, then confiscate all their belongings and shelter, behind their back, when they do.

It’s a stupid, self-defeating strategy.

What if the homeless are in their home-made shelter when the police find it? The police could confiscate away and haul the homeless person to jail if they don't cooperate.

Second, the ordinance attacks the homeless living in Recreational Vehicles not parked in a commercial (\$400/month) RV park.

Third, the ordinance attacks the homeless panhandling for survival on the streets, expanding the charges that can be brought by the police, encouraging official attacks on destitute people just trying to survive.

Though I'm now a modestly successful, college-educated business consultant and former elected and appointed city official today, I was once in my early life homeless, sleeping in a crack between buildings as snow fell on my head.

I did not do drugs or alcohol (still don't), and struggled to find work.

Shortly after I turned 18, my parent left me behind. I was penniless, homeless, friendless, in a town I’d been away from for years.

If the proposed Wichita ordinance had been enforced upon me, I would have lost the minimal shelter and cardboard box of food on which I survived — barely — leaving me to steal or starve.

As a fig leaf to cover the shame of their policy, the city has hastily arranged (mostly with others’ money) to concoct a makeshift barracks-type shelter, to cram homeless people together like prisoners. This is NOT a solution — unless the Nazi “Final Solution” is the goal.

And all the local shelters, combined, only have beds for about half of the 700 counted homeless — and many more are uncounted.

The Council has been told, repeatedly, that not all homeless people can bring themselves to such quarters.

Some are new to town, and know nothing of its limited resources, nor even how to navigate the big city.

Some are mentally ill, and paranoid, and scared of being surrounded by strangers (wouldn’t you be?).

Frankly, I have some homeless people tell me they are afraid to enter the congregate shelters, where they have been robbed or attacked by others, or even treated badly by staff.

Some are formerly abused homeless women who understandably fear encountering their abusers in the community shelter (some have spoken to the council about this).

Others are addicts, who cannot yet cope with the shelters’ prohibition on drug use.

Shall all these die, in the cold, without even their own meager shelter, just because we don’t like the look of them?

I’d rather have the streets littered with tents, bedding and trash than with frozen corpses (30-50 every winter for years, now; probably 100 if the ordinance passes). It’s a question of priorities, decency and civilized human values.

Let your council member know your values, by phone at 316-268-4331, and by showing up to their meeting at 9 a.m. Tuesday at City Hall, 455 N. Main.

Tell them you believe that the protection of property must not take precedence over the preservation of life.

Tell them we Wichitans have a conscience.

*Former Wichita Civil Rights Commissioner Richard Harris is a former chairman of two elected inner-city neighborhood councils.*

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