

Trash Services for Encampments: Why It Matters

Benefits of Providing Trash Services at Encampments

Unmanaged waste from encampments along urban streams can harm both residents and the environment. Addressing this issue through targeted trash services is not only a matter of public health and safety but also an investment in civic welfare, climate resilience, regulatory compliance, and dignity

Public Health: Encampments near waterways introduce microplastics, human waste, and hazardous debris into the environment, contaminating water sources and increasing risks of disease, pests, and exposure to biohazards for residents and maintenance workers.

Neighboring Communities and Businesses: Unmanaged encampment trash causes deterioration, odors, and flooding into nearby neighborhoods, impacting property values, business activity, and perceptions of safety.

Local Streams and the Bay: Unmanaged waste along urban streams flows directly to the Bay, harming wildlife, causing bank erosion and landslides, clogging drainage systems, and increasing cleanup costs, making early intervention far more cost-effective than downstream response.

Dignity & Wellbeing of Unhoused Residents: Providing trash services to homeless encampments helps increase the dignity and well-being of unhoused residents, build rapport with them, and connect them with other wrap-around services.

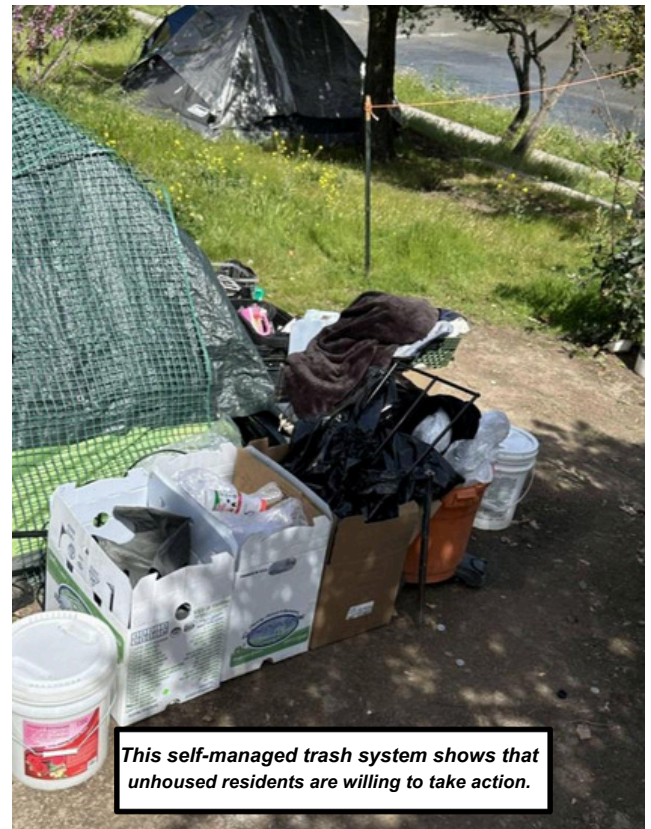
Fire Safety: Trash from homeless encampments along urban streams can start fires in urban areas.

Flood Control: Debris from encampments can block drainage systems and impede the proper flow of stormwater along creeks.

Local, Regional, State Permits and Regulations:

Addressing trash in encampments enables compliance with federal regulations (e.g., Clean Water Act), California state laws concerning litter, water body pollution, and the effects of hazardous waste, as well as water quality standards.

Wildlife: Unmanaged waste changes the chemical, physical and biological properties of urban streams, posing significant threats to wildlife and impacting streams.



This self-managed trash system shows that unhoused residents are willing to take action.

Key Factors to Consider

Location and Size of Encampments: The location and size of encampments significantly impact the environmental impact and feasibility of cleanup. Sites near major roads are easier to access and maintain, while others may be located in forested or deeply entrenched stream corridors that are difficult to reach. Areas that are not easily accessible pose greater logistical challenges for cleanup and long-term management. Large encampments may warrant greater focus for trash management due to their potential for high trash accumulation.



Hazardous Waste: Hazardous waste, including biohazards such as hypodermic needles and human waste, may require specialized interventions for effective disposal. These items might necessitate separate pickups, distribute biohazard containers, and provide education on proper disposal to encampment residents.

Cost and Funding: The cost of providing trash services to homeless encampments varies significantly depending on the size of the encampment, the frequency of trash pickups/cleanups, and the modality of the trash services provided (e.g., cash-for-trash programs, communal trash areas, or individual trash bins). Agencies and organizations can seek various sources of funding to support trash services at homeless encampments, including state and local grants, donations, and government operating funds. Not all funding will allow providing incentives for unhoused residents to participate in the cleanups.

Partnerships: Providing trash services to homeless encampments often requires the collaboration of multiple agencies and community-based organizations. Developing and maintaining these partnerships takes time & dedicated staff.

Frequency of Cleanups: The frequency of trash services provided to homeless encampments can vary depending on the size and location of the encampment, as well as the type of trash found at the encampment. Providing trash services to encampments can also be implemented in phases where the initial phases focus on sites with high levels of trash.

Unhoused Engagement: Including unhoused residents in cleanups can foster community trust and engagement, and help achieve consistent and sustainable results. Residents living in encampments are more likely to participate in trash cleanups and services when there is trust and consistency, often requiring the involvement of community organizations or peer outreach workers.

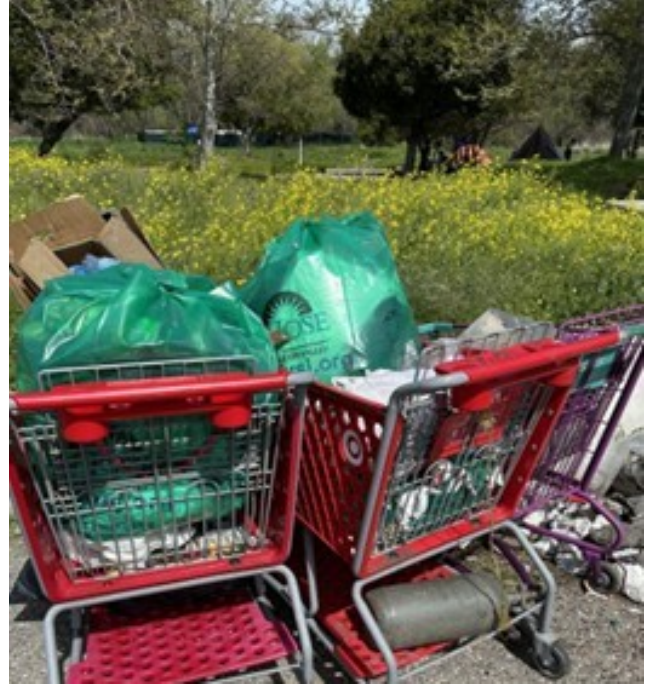
Illegal Dumping: A poorly designed waste management program for encampments can facilitate illegal dumping. Open dumpsters that are easily accessible by vehicle, trash piled for pickup for prolonged periods in a secluded location, and not providing a means to trace garbage (e.g., accepting any bags of trash, not just those with a specific logo or marking) are all examples of situations that might lead to more dumping. If illegal dumping does increase, how will you adjust to remedy this?

Case Studies

The following case studies provide different examples of trash service programs at unsanctioned encampments in the SF Bay Area.

Case Study: Beautify SJ Trash for Cash Program, Santa Clara County

Cash for Trash is part of the BeautifySJ program, a blight reduction and encampment management program run by the City of San José's Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood cards. Cash for Trash staff provides unhoused residents with green trash bags that have the City of San José logo on them. Unhoused residents can leave the bags filled with trash in designated areas or outside their tents with their names written on them for City staff to pick up. Unhoused residents receive \$5 on a Mastercard debit card for each bag they fill up, for a maximum of \$25 per person (i.e. 5 bags). Unhoused residents are advised not to put dangerous waste or sharp objects in the green bags for safety reasons. Instead, when safe collection sites are available, staff members direct them to these sites and advise them of suitable disposal options. The program operates Monday through Friday and costs approximately \$10,000 per week. Funding comes through the City of San José's General Fund as part of the BeautifySJ initiative, which supports community engagement and encampment response efforts.



Case Study: Windy Flats Encampment, Contra Costa County



Windy Flats is an unsanctioned, legacy encampment in the City of San Pablo consisting of approximately 36 residents. Contra Costa Health's Coordinated Outreach, Referral, and Engagement (CORE) works to engage, stabilize and identify permanent housing solutions for unsheltered individuals at this encampment. In addition, CORE also assists with trash cleanup at the camp and partners with the City of San Pablo's Public Works Department, San Pablo Police Department, and Contra Costa Fire Protection District for this effort. The Windy Flats cleanup was launched through CORE's partnership with camp residents to clear the general area, reduce negative impacts on the environment, and mitigate fire hazards. Residents who participated in the initial cleanup received gift cards to local stores as compensation (\$20/hour). Following this initial cleanup, CORE and its partners continue to provide ongoing trash maintenance by distributing trash bags to camp residents on a weekly basis and encouraging them to maintain their living spaces free of trash and litter. The bags are picked up by CORE every other week and taken to a local dump for disposal. Additionally, Contra Costa Health is in the process of contracting with a local hauler to dispose of large items (e.g., vehicles and furniture) and hazardous materials from the camp. Contra Costa Health is a recipient of the Encampment Resolution Fund grant through the California Department of Housing and Community Development and utilizes grant funds to support trash mitigation efforts at the camp. The total cost for trash cleanup for the 6 months CORE is on location, including bi-weekly small-scale trash cleanups and a one-time large trash hauler, is approximately \$38,000.

Case Study: Canyon Creeks Encampment, Alameda County

The Canyon Creeks encampment is an unsanctioned legacy encampment in Castro Valley consisting of 5-10 people. The camp is growing as a result of abatements in Oakland and San Leandro. ForestR and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) work together to provide trash cleanup services to the camp through The Everyone Program. As part of the program, ForestR visits the camp every other Saturday and distributes trash bags to its residents. The trash bags are provided by Caltrans and have their logo on them, so Caltrans can easily identify them. About 50-100 bags get filled that day and stacked along a high-traffic road. Camp residents receive \$5 in cash for each bag they fill, for a maximum of \$50 per person (i.e. 10 bags). Bags can weigh a maximum of 45lbs each, and hazardous waste is set aside rather than bagged. A sharps container is used to collect needles. Caltrans picks up the collected trash the following Monday morning. The Everyone Program costs ForestR between \$500- \$1,000 per month, and Caltrans spends another \$1,000-\$1,500 per month in staff time and dump fees to support the program. Caltrans incorporates those costs into their regular daily route work. Additional bags are distributed to the camp residents for them to use in between cleanups. The program is funded through corporate and individual donations to ForestR. More information:

<https://www.forestr.org/everyone/>



Case Study: Binford Road Encampment, Marin County



The Binford Road encampment is an unsanctioned RV/trailer encampment in unincorporated Marin County that consists of 75 vehicles owned by approximately 50 individuals along Binford Road. Several Marin County departments and organizations work together to provide trash cleanup services to the camp in addition to supportive services to house camp members. They include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Sheriff's Office, the Community Development Agency, the Department of Public Works, County Counsel, and Downtown Street Teams. The cleanup efforts began with the removal of hazardous materials, combustibles, and other debris at individual RV/trailer sites, starting with the ones that had the most trash accumulation. Afterwards, three communal trash areas were set up, so camp residents could dispose of their own trash. Because these communal trash areas tended to attract rodents and, to some extent, facilitated illegal dumping, individual trash bins were then provided for each RV/trailer. The trash bins are serviced three times per week by a local company. Cleanups of individual RV/trailer sites still occur as needed. This program costs approximately \$450,000 per year, including substantial costs associated with remediation of accidental RV fires to remove and remediate contaminated materials and soils. It is funded through two Encampment Resolution Fund grants from the California Department of Housing and Community Development, surplus money from the California State budget, and some Marin County general funds. The trash cleanup program is part of broader efforts to house encampment residents and connect them to different services through quarterly service fairs.