

# Panel discusses the bad — and good — of Operation Rio Grande on heels of critical ACLU report

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*Steve Griffin, Deseret News*

*People lie on the grass with their belongings on the grounds of Salt Lake City's Main Library on Thursday, Oct. 18, 2018.*

SALT LAKE CITY — Days after the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah released a report slamming Operation Rio Grande as "heavy-handed" — a report that rattled the operation's staunchest supporters — a public conversation about the yearslong effort has reignited.

A panel of officials involved in the state's homeless issues in widespread ways, including Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown, homeless providers, and a defense attorney, discussed Thursday the impact of Operation Rio Grande — the good and the bad.

Among the panelists, Kate Conyers, a former public defender and currently a private defense attorney at Conyers & Nix, praised the ACLU's report for doing "an incredible job" of identifying problems Operation Rio Grande has contributed to, including the "criminalization" of homelessness.

"I can't forgive that Operation Rio Grande assumed and still assumes that most people who called 'the block' their home, that they must be criminals," Conyers said, decrying a build-up of charges that have complicated the lives of arrestees and clogged the criminal justice system.

However, Conyers also acknowledged the effort has helped change lives. She noted she was "deeply touched" when she attended a graduation ceremony Wednesday night where 15 Operation Rio Grande arrestees celebrated sobriety and cleansed their criminal records. Still, Conyers cited that just three of 1,106 Operation Rio Grande bookings at the Salt Lake County Jail were third-degree felonies, and only 1/5 had any felony charges at all. She noted that most charges that have resulted from the operation have been misdemeanors or active warrants, which can complicate the lives of people already struggling with other issues. While the panel discussion — organized by the ACLU of Utah and moderated by KRCL's Lara Jones and Billy Palmer — was tame, supporters of Operation Rio Grande, including House Speaker Greg Hughes, came to the effort's defense.

The speaker, leading into a question to the panel, said he was "more than disappointed" by the report, which he labeled misleading and "myopic." Hughes said it was inaccurate for the report to state that of more than 5,000 arrests, only one in 13 people were placed in a new treatment program because many of the 5,000 were repeat arrests.

Hughes cited numbers calculated by Salt Lake County, noting that even though only 243 residential treatment beds have been added to the system, that number doesn't include additional detox, outpatient and intensive outpatient expansion. In Operation Rio Grande's first year, 1,165 individuals have accessed behavioral health treatment services within Salt Lake County's network.

Hughes said "if we so grossly misrepresent the work of law enforcement, the work of the county, the work of the state" it could "mislead" policymakers to think the state has squandered the estimated \$70 million it spent on this effort.

"This isn't just heavy-handed, black helicopters flying around," Hughes said.

The ACLU did correct its report Wednesday night, according to an ACLU spokesman, Jason Stevenson, to clarify the 5,000 figure as arrests, not individuals.

The Pioneer Park Coalition, another supporter of Operation Rio Grande, also issued a written statement ahead of Thursday night's panel, calling the report "shallow," with an analysis that "failed to recognize the significant level of lawlessness and chaos" that existed before.

"The Pioneer Park (and) Rio Grande neighborhood was the epicenter and rendezvous point for crime that impacted all of Salt Lake. It was the crossroads of the state for drug trafficking and a meeting place for people looking for drugs and trouble," said Tiffanie Provost, chairwoman of the Pioneer Park Coalition, in the statement, calling Operation Rio Grande "the essential first step in the process to make the area safe."

Panelist Matt Melville, director of Catholic Community Services' homeless services, also credited Operation Rio Grande for ending "one of the worst chapters" in Salt Lake City history.

"People were being victimized on the hour before Operation Rio Grande happened," he said.

Conyers, responding to Hughes, said she agreed "there were some serious criminal elements" in the Rio Grande area before the operation and it has resulted "in a lot of good things," but she added there is "no question in my mind there were a lot more arrests than there needed to be."

Stevenson, addressing the crowd at the conclusion of Thursday night's panel, said the purpose of the report was to "keep the conversation going" on Operation Rio Grande as policymakers approach the June 2019 deadline for the closure of the downtown shelter.

"We need to keep asking hard questions to make it better," he said.