

Reese: Homeless Utahns Are Being Ignored

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By Isaac Reese

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By [Isaac Reese](#), Opinion Writer

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There is a moral failure across the streets of the United States, as people experiencing homelessness are constantly forced to wander without access to needed resources while being harassed by law enforcement. Homelessness has recently become a heated topic within Salt Lake City, and recent tensions have resulted in [the arrest of 17 protesters by the Salt Lake City Police Department](#). These protesters were met with police equipped in riot gear ready to end the protest, but this issue cannot be solved with arrests. People are justifiably angry, and our community participates in this moral failure when it allows even one human being to sleep on the cold winter streets.

Joe Peterson, a man experiencing homelessness, [expressed his frustration](#) to the *Salt Lake Tribune* over the arrest-heavy protest in Washington Square Park. Peterson complied with law enforcement and left the protest by 11 p.m., as he believed he made his point and act of civil disobedience clear. In regard to his fellow protestors, he said, "I think the folks that stayed [Saturday] night got more involved with their personal agendas than ours."

This comment is telling, as there seems to be, well, a striking lack of homeless Utahns involved in the conversation about homelessness in Utah. Here Peterson is implying that protesters have co-opted the movement and used homeless populations and the issue of homelessness as some sort of shield for their anger against the SLCPD and Salt Lake City. While these protestors' feelings towards these groups are valid, they also need to realize the privilege they have as people with access to shelter that those experiencing homelessness do not.

The ACLU of Utah recently [called out](#) the Salt Lake County Health Department for not giving due process to the homeless population at a homeless encampment. The civil liberties organization argued that the county health department violates its own regulations as well as the 14th amendment. The ACLU of Utah is exactly right that the county has violated the rights of individuals.

The health department claimed authority to require people to vacate the areas where they are in violation of county campground laws without providing a formal notice. "The notices aren't gentle reminders that people need to pick up their litter or it will be thrown away," said ACLU attorney Jason Groth. "The notices are followed by a heavy law enforcement presence that secures an area. Law enforcement requires people to leave and people's blankets and tents are thrown away in the middle of winter. These items are not trash, they are items needed to survive."

The county does not give a real and fair notice to the population, nor do they list ways for people to appeal the notice at all. This gives them no voice whatsoever and no ability to have an actual conversation with those in power. The methods that law enforcers are taking against this unprotected population are hurting and killing those experiencing homelessness. The right of due process for Utah's homeless population is virtually nonexistent. Their voices are suppressed and silenced.

Their tents, blankets and other items are collected and thrown away by the police and clean up crews. To those in charge, these seem like trash, but to those who are homeless, these are tools literally used to survive and make it through the cold harsh winters. If I bulldozed down the home of SLC Police Chief Mike Brown — leaving him with just the clothes he was wearing that cold winter day — that man would surely freeze and suffer. He would struggle to make it to the next day without the basic necessities of warmth and shelter. All humans need shelter to survive, but too many of us do not see people experiencing homelessness as human beings.

Police are pushing people experiencing homelessness farther and farther away from the community. They rip apart their supplies, destroy any shelter they have, and harass them. The general public provides no support, with wealthier classes pitying them and looking down on them as objects that don't belong in society. We need to do better as a community to support this vulnerable population, and that starts with elevating the voices of the homeless population and giving them a seat at the table.