

April 23, 2024

Dear Mayor Bowser

I moved to Washington D.C. a year ago, but I have visited many times since the early 1980s for work and to see the museums and monuments. Rates of crime have gone up and down over the decades. Homelessness, vagrancy, graffiti, and litter have always been a challenge to the city government and its residents. Yet until the past few years, I do not recall seeing informal camping sites outside the Kennedy Center, in Georgetown, and outside the State Department on Virginia Avenue. Green spaces within the District have for years now been occupied with small camps comprised of tents, piles of personal possessions, and garbage. As the warmer months have arrived, other individuals also sleep within the informal camps without a tent, using blankets and soft furnishings.

City-provided trash cans, not intended for residential waste, are not able to absorb the domestic trash of all the camp inhabitants – even should they choose to use them, as many evidently do not. Rats are as common as squirrels in the camp areas.

The current situation could only be possible if one of the following conditions obtains.

- A. There is no legal impediment to any citizen setting up a tent or sleeping rough at will on public green space in the District of Columbia. If so, this will be welcome news to Americans from the 50 states who visit every year, some of whom find paying for hotel accommodation burdensome.
- B. Setting up tents on public green space is illegal, but neither city nor federal authorities choose to enforce the law.

If the situation is as in (B) above, then the District can act to protect vulnerable residents while upholding the law. A high proportion of the residents of informal camps appear to suffer from mental illness, habitual substance abuse, or both. The District should assess each individual separately.

- (i) If an individual suffers from mental illness, they should be required to attend an appropriate facility for treatment.
- (ii) If an individual suffers from a substance abuse disorder, they should be required to attend an appropriate facility for treatment.
- (iii) If an individual is not mentally ill, nor suffering from substance abuse, then they should be required to avail themselves of city-provided accommodation for people without housing.
- (iv) If an individual refuses treatment for mental illness or substance abuse, and also refuses housing, then the District should hold them accountable for the various

quodidian offences they are committing such as camping, littering, loitering, defecating, and urinating on public land.

Mayor Bowser, millions of visitors every year come to see the monuments, museums, parks, theaters, and great government seats of our nation's capital. I am sure that, like me, you are proud of this great city and want to keep it clean and safe for both residents and visitors. To show Washington at its best, including how we deal with our most needy, it behooves your administration to cooperate with the various federal agencies located and empowered within the District and end illegal camping.

If, however, it is your policy to continue to allow individuals and groups to sleep, cook, and live on city-controlled grassy areas, then you should announce this opportunity to both American and foreign visitors so that they can enjoy the experience and savings as well.

Yours Faithfully,

S.R. Hankinson

Ward 2, Washington, D.C.