



LEAVE TO NOWHERE

A short summary of the crisis of houselessness in the River Valley
Spring 2021 - 2022



Introduction

The purpose of this zine is to provide an overview of the city and nonprofit response to the houseless crisis in Kalamazoo since March 2021. While houselessness in Kalamazoo has a long and problematic history, we are choosing to focus on March 2021 through present because this has been a particularly challenging time for our unhoused neighbors.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the houselessness crisis soared throughout the so-called United States, and Kalamazoo was not an exception. The Mills Street encampment, the largest and most centrally-located camp in town, grew visibly between 2020 and 2021, and became a hot-button issue as tents sprung up closer and closer to the road. In response, many community members began various grassroots outreach efforts in the camp, non-profit and social services attempted to find ways to reach and enroll residents in programs, and city officials and police made regular visits often resulting in confrontations and arrests.

Trigger Warning:
This zine contains pictures and descriptions of police brutality.



Bulldozer and crews destroying what was left of Mills Camp

SPRING 2021

At the tail end of an especially brutal winter, the Hotel Intervention Program (HIP) was announced, pledging to provide hotel rooms for over one hundred houseless individuals. This program was managed by a series of nonprofit organizations and was to run for three months while providing wraparound services in order for participants to get the support and resources they needed to eventually move into permanent housing. Many camp residents elected to enroll and move into the Baymont hotel on the west side of town. While the HIP had good intentions, there were many challenges. The hotel was far from camp and transportation was only available for one day. People were told they could only bring one tote of belongings, forcing them to leave many personal items behind. Another major challenge reported by program participants was a lack of understanding from the program's staff, specifically the security guards. Residents were not made fully aware of the rules of the program prior to agreeing to join, and reported feeling as though they were in jail and constantly being watched and reprimanded. There also seemed to be contention between the nonprofits engaged in the program regarding how to handle addiction and mental health challenges, and what Housing First really means.

While the HIP was extended through July 2021, many participants began getting kicked out and left to go back outside. Two participants, both Black and disabled women, reported they had been ousted because the room above theirs flooded and they had to temporarily move into another room. Due to their disabilities, they were not able to get their belongings together quick enough for the HIP employee who was handling the situation. The participants became frustrated and were in turn punished by getting kicked out of the program, evicted from their housing. One of these women recently moved into an apartment via a housing voucher, but left the hotel with nowhere to go, no way to get her belongings, and no transitional support from the HIP or collaborating organizations between June 2021 and April 2022. The HIP stated that its goal was to prioritize Black women and families, but they were removing Black women from the hotel and leaving them to fend for themselves.

Other critiques of the HIP include: the program ran during the time of year living outside is easier than other seasons (there were no organized sheltering relief efforts for houseless individuals by the city or nonprofits during winter 2021 or winter 2022), the program did not adequately or equitably serve BIPOC individuals and families, the program left individuals with no plan or resources for housing after leaving the hotel, and staff did not have the proper training to navigate challenges presented. Many participants expressed regret over joining the program in the first place, others reported they were worse off after leaving the hotel than when they moved in.

Three individuals participating in the HIP died while living at the Baymont.

While the HIP was active, another housing program was occurring at the former Knights Inn, which had been purchased by the LIFT foundation (run by Mayor David Anderson, boo!). This program began temporarily sheltering families experiencing houselessness in February 2021, though residents were again put back on the streets at the end of April so the Knights Inn could be renovated into an affordable housing complex called the "LodgeHouse." The LodgeHouse was supposed to be complete at the end of 2021, though at the time this zine was written (May 2022), the former hotel still appears to be gutted. Despite the many billions of dollars the city has that could benefit permanent supportive housing efforts, the LIFT foundation continues to crowdsource for funds to finish the project. Former residents reported mistreatment while staying at the Knights Inn (operated by Integrated Services of Kalamazoo (which David Anderson also works for) and KMG Prestige, one individual was forcibly removed from his room by a security guard in the middle of the night without any of his belongings, including his shoes.

After many of the Mills Street camp residents relocated to the hotel, the remaining residents were informed that the camp would be evicted at the end of March 2021. Remaining residents were told by police to go live at the Hotop camp located in a field across the train tracks from Mills. HIP participants who had moved from Mills were not informed of the camp being evicted, and did not have a chance to retrieve the belongings they had to leave behind in order to move into the Baymont. The Mills Street camp and everything remaining there was bulldozed and fenced off in April 2021.



"Please Help Tent City Lives Matter" painted on a tarp at Mills St. camp

Police telling people to leave Mills St.

Bulldozer piling belongings at Mills St.



Fenced-off lot where the Mills St. camp was

SUMMER 2021

As more and more individuals lost their housing due to the eviction moratorium ending, and as people were booted from the hotel program, the Hotop encampment grew in numbers that surpassed the former Mills Street encampment. The summer brought long periods of extreme rainfall, flooding Hotop which sat at the edge of the Kalamazoo River. The camp's terrain became a mud pit, making it difficult for residents and people providing aid and resources to travel around and through the field. Temperatures surged in July, causing health concerns due to dehydration and overheating. At the end of July, the Hotel Intervention Program came to a close, leaving the majority of participants to move back outside, into a mud pit, with no support for transitional housing. As they moved outside, HIP participants were supposed to be given a tent, a cell phone, and a \$50 gift card. Most people did not get all three and others didn't get anything. It was reported that HIP employees were giving multiples of each to people that they believed engaged more with the program.



Signs posted warning of the contaminated soil and flooding

Warning signs began being posted at Hotop, indicating the presence of toxic materials in the soil. The Hotop camp was situated on a super contaminated piece of land owed by the city and under control of the Brownfield Redevelopment Authority. The Brownfield Redevelopment Authority is a city entity which secures plots of land polluted with heavy metals and toxic waste, then sells them at a cheap price (usually to white business owners) for development purposes. Let us not bypass this information without acknowledging the impact it has on gentrification, individuals living in historically redlined districts, and environmental racism. The fact is the residents of Hotop were told to go there by the police, some even getting rides to camp in squad cars, all while

the city not only knew of the contamination but also the plans for development: they knew they were corralling houseless people into a toxic field and they knew residents would later be violently displaced yet again.

In August, murmurs around Hotop being evicted closely followed widespread rumors of a parvo outbreak at camp. Parvo is a deadly disease which typically affects dogs. Quickly, the gossip turned to dead dogs being thrown in the river, local animal advocacy groups began vaccination and rehoming efforts, and it became evident that public concern was mostly saved for the dogs and had little to no regard for the people. According to residents at the time, only one dog at camp had tested positive for parvo. The parvo rumor was incredibly harmful to camp residents as it functioned to portray the camp as a disgusting, disease-ridden hellhole and it was the RESIDENTS' fault. Of course, there has always been hostility towards the houseless community, but the parvo allegation changed the perspective of individuals who otherwise had not outwardly expressed antagonistic and classist views.

In a survey conducted in the last days of August, residents opened up about what would be an ideal living situation for them. What was gleaned from their answers was interesting. Obviously, many residents said they would prefer to live in a supportive housing situation, but others stated they liked living outside as long as they had community, basic amenities, and a chance to live cooperatively and without being constantly bullied by the cops. They spoke of the contaminated land, wishing they could build gardens to grow their own food. They spoke of structuring a camp around community areas such as a kitchen, a bath house, and a recreation area. In summary, camp residents wanted a place where they could feed and clean themselves, where they could feel part of a community, where they could gain a sense of stability, and where the cops would leave them alone...not really much to ask for.



Video Interview with O.G. who stayed at Tent City



Protest in front of City Hall Sep. 15th

FALL 2021

On September 15th, police began putting up signs around camp stating residents had to leave by the 29th. At this time, many camp residents and community members began expressing their disgust at the city's lack of plan and empathy. The main question for the city was, "where will they go?" And the only answer the city had to that question was the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission (KGM), a Christian charity that is not 2SLGBTQIA+ friendly, does not allow addicts who aren't in recovery, has had hundreds of complaints about the organization from the bigoted staff to the moldy food, and whose extensive rules make staying there a huge challenge. The KGM does not allow partners to room together, and they do not allow dogs, basically forcing individuals to give up their support systems in exchange for a roof over their head and a plastic cot. Since KGM is a religious institution, they do not have to report their funding sources; however, according to their 2020-2021 annual report, 51% (\$3.5 million) of their funding came from private donations; so we are left to wonder, who are they beholden to?

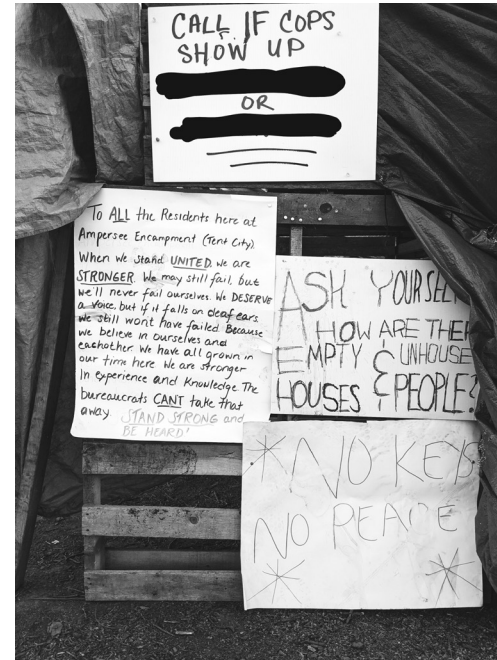
In the two weeks following the eviction notice, camp residents were asked what their plan was for the 29th. Some people planned to move to Stadium camp on the west side of town; however, an eviction notice for the PlazaCorp-owned (a billion dollar multinational corporation) land had been posted for October 1st. Most had no idea where to go or how to move their belongings, and didn't want to leave because they had made Hotpot their home. Many campsites were more than just a tent on the ground, they were creatively makeshift structures with windows and doors, with furniture and carpets, areas people kept tidy and felt proud of. Above all, the city had forced them to move to this field, and now they were being told to not just leave, but to leave to nowhere as it became policy for cops to collapse any tent set up



Trespassing notice posted on Sep 15th for the 29th

within city limits.

On the morning of September 29th, residents and others standing with them expected the enormous sweep to begin at any moment. A crowd had gathered along the main road with signs and banners. People inside the camp were preparing, some erecting makeshift barricades, others frantically packing their things. Tensions were high as police were expected to swoop in and remove everybody. Despite it all, this day was incredibly special; moments of solidarity and even joy permeated through the dark haze of promised violence. In the end, the police only watched the protests from afar and the sweep didn't happen. The portapotties were removed and drones were flying above camp, but other than that police made themselves scarce. As the day went



Toilet structure built after porta-potty was removed. Protestor signs are posted to the side.

on, residents began planning for their survival: they built pit toilets, made signs to hold in demonstration, and did what they could to fortify their homes. Between 4 and 5 PM, a news article was released stating the eviction was on hold for a couple of weeks. The collective relief brought an even greater sense of solidarity as camp residents gathered in the center of the field to eat burritos and discuss their plan to take care of one-another moving forward.

Throughout the following week, a surge of efforts from the city and nonprofits commenced with a whopping ten residents agreeing to go stay temporarily at the Gospel Mission. Although according to the Continuum of Care (the conglomerate of nonprofit administrators who sit on a board and discuss housing issues) their endeavor resulted in the camp shrinking from nearly 200 residents to under 50, obviously a bold-faced lie. The city later claimed that the COC's request for more time to render services was the reason for the postponed eviction, although never publically mentioned the large protests.

In the early morning of October 6th, exactly one week after the cancelled sweep, police arrived and immediately began laying railroad ties and gravel in the mud to get their bulldozers in. By 8 am they had begun going tent by tent and notifying residents they had 5 minutes to leave. People frantically called for help. The entire police force was at camp; the ones who weren't busy slashing and collapsing tents on top of still-sleeping residents were positioned every few feet along the perimeter, barricad



ing every point of entry. No one was allowed to enter or re-enter the camp, meaning if an individual wasn't present when the five-minute notice was given, or if someone couldn't carry everything they needed they had to abandon it. Residents were panicking, screaming and crying about what they had to leave behind. People reported having to leave their pets, their vital records, their medications, groceries, ashes and memorials of loved ones, their kids' artwork, the gear they had collected to survive the impending winter...literally everything was piled into giant trash heaps to sit for days afterward.

Residents with no better options set up a new camp directly adjacent to the fenced off and empty Tent City. Grassroots efforts ramped up to gather food, water, medications and camping supplies to replace what the cops had destroyed. People mourned the loss of their homes. The police again posted an eviction notice, giving the new camp and a slew of other properties in the area 2 days to vacate. This camp was under 24 hour police surveillance, as were the piles of belongings on the other side of the fence.

On October 7th, protests continue all day. One person entered the closed camp in order to retrieve a memorial item for a distraught resident. This person was violently tackled and injured by a Michael Miller, an officer working for the KDPS. They were taken into custody, denied medical treatment, and held for over 24 hours in jail. They are still experiencing pain and suffering from the injury that Miller is responsible for. One other person was also arrested but was released with a trespassing ticket.

Then, October 8th was the day of the next sweep. Residents were told they must leave the lot by noon. The person who had plans to purchase the lot came to camp and discussed with the residents what they would like to



Police collapse tents; Police dismantle homes; Bulldozer piling belongings; Police guarding bulldozer from protestors; Protestor being arrested; Protestors injuries afterward

see happen with that piece of land. People recounted many of the same points they brought up during the survey: a common kitchen and bath house, a sense of community, and to be relieved of the constant harassment they experienced from the police. The prospective buyer even held an emergency meeting with our blessed mayor to expedite signing the deed so people could stay there while a plan for a more permanent (sanctioned) camp was drawn up. Despite their endeavors, rights to the vacant lot were not signed over and the police showed up in full force right at noon. At this time, many traumatized residents were frantically packing what they could to get away, while many others assembled to protest. Police told everyone to begin packing their belongings and leave, again saying to go to the Mission. The first person to be arrested was an elderly resident of the camp who was injured when police tackled him as he was trying to walk away. This arrest caused an uproar among the entire crowd and the police moved to attack the rest of the group, focusing the bulk of their brutality on an Afro-Indigenous mother who was attempting to get medical attention for a Black protestor who was injured and being held on the ground by two cops. This woman was brutally arrested and also injured, which caused even more escalation as the pigs erratically assaulted the crowd with OC spray.

All in all, ten people were arrested between October 7th and 8th. The arrestees are comprised of a group of BIPOC, trans, queer, and houseless individuals, many of whom are still fighting felony charges at the time of this writing. Specifically,

the Afro-Indigenous mother is facing trumped-up and excessive allegations. This comes as no surprise as the criminal legal system is inherently racist and misogynoiristic; however, it is especially sinister and shameful to claim an Indigenous person is trespassing on land that is unceded Potawatomi territory.



Police arresting protestors on Oct. 8th (all)

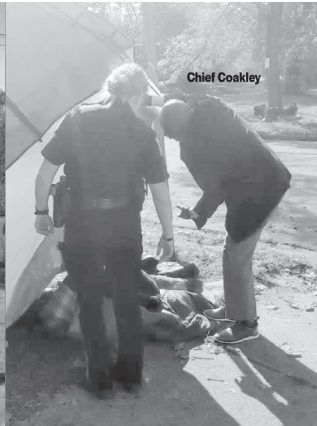
Police Chief Cookley unzipping a resident's tent



Cookley Mayor David Anderson arguing with a resident



Police Chief Cookley shaking a tent to wake up a resident



Trailhead for camp

WINTER 2022

On October 13th, chief of police Vernon Cookley and mayor David Anderson took some time to visit the people they had pushed into the street. Some residents had established another camp in the lot of a nearby business and the city officials told them that there was no camping allowed within Kalamazoo city limits and that they would be arrested and prosecuted for setting up a tent anywhere in the surrounding areas. So, people disappeared. October 14th, the Stadium camp was evicted. At the time of eviction, about 40 people were set up in a large field that had once been a trailer park. Several of the newer residents of Stadium had only recently arrived from Hotop, once again having to pack up their entire lives and find an unknown place to sleep.

Sweeps continued regardless of the temperature and snowfall. One spot people landed was a beautiful wooded area which seemed to be outside the vague limits given to them by city and police spokespersons. This site, situated in a fairly isolated area, had about a dozen people living on it after Hotop was evicted. At one point, the township police came and said they had a couple days to leave the woods. About half the people staying there packed up and left, while the rest hung bacon in the trees and waited in anticipation of a struggle. The cops never came that day, or for months afterwards. Eventually, more people started moving there as the situation within city limits worsened.

In a move that seemed little more than an attempt to placate the angry community, the city and nonprofit Housing Resources Inc. (HRI) announced that they were investing in 50 "housing pods" from a company in Oregon which would be shipped here and ready for people to move into by November. There were going to be 34 single pods and 16 couples' pods, and priority would once again be given to Black women and families. Former camp residents seemed doubtful of the program coming into fruition, especially before the winter.

To the surprise of no one, the pod project kept being delayed, from November to December, then February...there are still no pods at the time of this writing.

While frustrating, the unhoused community is used to being lied to about housing opportunities. It sucks that the city and nonprofits will make announcements such as these to make themselves look good after royally fucking up, then fail to follow through on their promises. It is harmful and it should stop happening.

An E-Mail from Deputy City Manager Laura Lam on 9/13

From: Lam, Laura <LamL@kalamazoozcity.org>
Sent: Monday, September 13, 2021 8:27 AM
To: Ritsema, Jim <ritsemaj@kalamazoozcity.org>
Subject: RE: Ampersee encampment closure plan - pls review

Flyer for Oct 4th and No Trespassing Signs



Jim - Circling back on this, we definitely need KDPS to be on top of directed patrols near the encampment site and be aware of where people may go next. I suggest we follow our informal protocol of zero tolerance in parks, near well fields, former encampment sites that have been closed, and taking action when asked by private property owners to enforce No Trespassing. Beyond that, we need to monitor sites and intervene when we see more than 3 - 4 tents together. We need to "thread the needle" of staying on top of this without chasing people without housing all over town.

I am planning on sending out a email to the internal team today and then to CC with the plan to post notices on Wednesday.

Laura

Someone's van with HOUSING FIRST painted on it



Rules posted in Arcadia Creek Festival Place

Arcadia Creek Park is located across the street from KGM and shares a parking lot with recently-renovated luxury loft apartments. For years, many folks would utilize the park while the shelter closed during the day, others would sleep there as well. During winter 2022, the police amped up their presence at the park, sweeping it daily. New

park rules were posted, stating there was a two-hour time limit to being in the park, and that any possessions left in the park for over two hours were subject to immediate destruction and disposal.

Installed in the spring of 2021, the community fridge and pantry located at the food co-op (PFC) became the hub for unhoused folks after the major sweeps that happened in the fall. Folks went there to connect with basic survival needs, resources, programs, and most importantly, one-another. If it hadn't been for the fridge and pantry, maintaining these connection and outreach efforts after the camp evictions would not have been possible. Sweeping camps intentionally causes displacement and alienation, so having a location to gather in a community setting is a vital asset to survival, especially during the cold months.

At least 4 individuals died during the winter months following the Hotop eviction.



Community Fridge Pantry at the People's Food Co-op



Bacon hanging at a camp anticipating police



Police at entrance of a camp in April mass sweep

SPRING 2022

It is illegal to be houseless in Kalamazoo. Tents and camps are still being destroyed by the police every day. A person gets swept one day, loses their tent and everything in it, then sets up and gets swept a day later. Public spaces continue to be privatized, we watch as houseless people are forced out of sight, denied their basic rights, and are treated like shit by the city, the police, business owners, and social workers.

On April 30th, the community fridge and pantry located at the PFC was closed. The fridge and pantry functioned as a means of survival for many of its patrons. The PFC is a business, so it should not come as a surprise that what was meant to be a space that existed outside of capitalism has been forcibly shut down because of it. Regardless, this has been a giant blow to our houseless neighbors who grew to count on the fridge and pantry for countless reasons.

There has been no significant movement towards the pods, the LodgeHouse appears to be months from being complete, there aren't enough housing units for all of the vouchers that are being handed out. The city and nonprofits have told these people so many lies, they have gotten to the point they no longer believe anything that is told to them.

The rumor is the city is looking for a new plot of land for an encampment. If that is indeed their plan, it seems as though the many sweeps, and all of the tragedies that accompany them, could have easily been avoided.



Door of the community fridge as it is announced it's being moved

CONCLUSION

Sweeps are violent, they are racist, they are classist, they are abelist. They are a reflection of the sick world we live in, they encompass the white supremacist, colonial, cis-heteropatriarchal, capitalist system of oppression dominant in the so-called United States. In order to end the houseless crisis, we must destroy these interlocking systems of abuse, by any and all means necessary.

We cannot quantify the sweeps or the damage that has been done by them.

Drop the Charges.

Stop the Sweeps.



The courthouse with "Stop the Sweeps,
Drop the Charges" written in tape

Written and Compiled by: Stop The Sweeps Kalamazoo
Published by: river valley revolt

RIP Larry
RIP Isaac
RIP Hailey
RIP Porkchop
RIP Trevor
RIP Jim
RIP Keith

fuck everyone who had a part in the sweeps