

Dear Hamilton City Council,

Over the past year I have had the privilege of working as a connector with the Hamilton Encampment Support Network (HESN) providing material support and advocacy for encampment residents. Despite our limited resources and the fact that all of our members are volunteers, HESN operates under the guiding principle of respect for the dignity and autonomy of encampment residents, and has always worked to mitigate the harm of homelessness in this city.

During the time that I have been involved with this work, I have personally watched the city dismantle multiple encampments. This process begins with ambiguity for the residents.

Since the encampment response protocol ended, residents are often informed of the eviction on the same day that it happens. City workers and police destroy the vast majority of the possessions of each resident without providing them the means to move or store them. Residents will be informed of their options: sometimes they are given a shelter bed for a couple nights, other times they are just moved to another public space outside. Either way, they often remain unhoused, sleeping outside, only now their stuff has been thrown out. The inadequacies of the shelter system have been well documented by both residents themselves and various advocacy groups. This violence is how the city approaches interactions with its homeless citizens.

Two weeks ago, on November 24, HESN attended a teardown at JC Beamer park. The people living in this park had been in contact with HESN members for several weeks prior to the teardown. They had clearly communicated that they were opposed to being moved and that they would like support from HESN whenever it happened. There was a fire early that morning, which emergency services responded to. The city apparently saw this devastating event as the perfect opportunity to force them to move. By the time members of HESN arrived the eviction was already underway. Police arrested two members of HESN while simultaneously destroying three peoples' homes. The arrests themselves, which are clearly documented in video, involved the violent assault of HESN members, including one member who had her hijab torn off and was pinned to the ground with an officer's knee to her neck. Police have attempted to characterize HESN's actions as non-peaceful, yet they made the decision to force residents to move against their wishes and ignored their request for support.

The Hamilton police attempt to justify the violence of the teardowns and arrests by citing safety, yet they continue to destroy belongings and tents and push residents from park to park, ignoring the fact that no safe alternatives exist. The city and police hide behind claims about the dangers of encampment living, which no one denies, yet their only solution puts residents in even more danger. City council continues to fail to adequately address the needs of my unhoused neighbours, and its lack of compassion is evident whenever the topic is discussed. If we are going to talk about hate mitigation, then we must begin here, with the most vulnerable members of our community, whom you are failing.

Sarah Dawson