

A PUSH FOR SHELTER



Rochester Grants Pass Resistance, formed in response to the Supreme Court's ruling on Grants Pass v. Johnson, held a press conference to address the consequences the ruling could have in Rochester. MADISON SCOTT/DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE

New Rochester group responds to Supreme Court ruling on encampments

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USA TODAY NETWORK

Following the Supreme Court's decision in Grants Pass v. Johnson to allow criminalization of sleeping on public property, local housing advocates formed a resistance group to address how this ruling could impact the unhoused communities in the city of Rochester.

Rochester Grants Pass Resistance held a press conference on Saturday calling for legislative action from Monroe County and the city to try to limit the consequences the decision could have on the unhoused community here.

One by one, advocates and those directly impacted by homelessness took turns stepping up to the microphone and podium that was set up on the corner of Joseph Avenue and Looms Street on Saturday. Be-

hind them stood a group of Resistance members holding signs that read, "No jail, no fines for sleeping outside" and "No-barrier shelter." A few local elected officials stood in solidarity with the group as well.

What does the ruling mean?

The June 2024 ruling found that laws regulating camping on public property, even if those living there have nowhere else to go, do not violate the Eighth Amendment in constituting "cruel and unusual punishment." Advocates across the country have warned that this ruling could make it easier for municipalities to criminalize unhoused populations, in turn making it harder for people in these communities to be granted permanent housing in the future.

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"You look around this area, all you see is empty lots where we need housing. There's no reason in 2024 that we have people sleeping in tents. There's no reason that these shelters are overfull."

Oscar Brewer
Speaker at news conference

Shelter

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The impact of the Grants Pass decision has already been felt in numerous cities and states nationwide. In California for example, which is home to roughly one-third of the nation's population of homeless people, Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered state agencies to remove encampments on state land. His executive order also provided guidance for cities and counties to follow suit.

In July, Portland, Oregon began enforcing its ordinance banning encampments, which allows the city to fine or imprison those living in encampments if they refuse available shelters and services. Those accused of violating this ordinance could face up to a maximum \$100 fine, up to seven days in jail or both.

How group is demanding change

Back at the Grants Pass Resistance press conference, Oscar Brewer stepped up to the podium, rain sprinkling down on his face.

"So I'm here today to urge Mayor Malik Evans, County Executive Adam Bello to do what you've been saying to the community and build these bridges that we are not seeing built," he said.

Brewer said he has experienced firsthand the struggles of getting off the streets and into housing. The issues, he said, lie with the slumlords and "bad systems" which force people back onto the streets. Brewer called for the City of Rochester to reinvest in the Emergency Repair Program so that repairs on properties can be done to create safe housing for those in the community.

"You look around this area, all you see is empty lots where we need housing," Brewer said. "There's no reason in 2024 that we have people sleeping in tents. There's no reason that these shelters are overfull. There's no reason we're raising our daughters, our sons, as single parents inside of a hotel. That is not home."

The group rang out in applause and cheers.

Next up, Julius Greer Senior.

"God is good," Greer began. He's been homeless for 33 years, he said, going in and out of shelters.

Most of the time, he said he would leave the shelters to go back to his tent, which he calls his best friend. These shelters that have been set up to help people like Greer, he said, are inaccessible for



Julius Greer Senior spoke at the press conference about the struggles he's faced in shelters during the 33 years he spent unshoused. MADISON SCOTT/DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE

people with disabilities and many have unsanitary living conditions.

"You go in these shelters, and some of these shelters, they look good, but then you have to deal with the bed bugs. You have to deal with the people," Greer said.

Angela Miens shared similar experiences to Greer. "What I have found in shelters is that it's a lot of garbage because the fact that they do not support you," Miens said. She said these shelters often treat you like a child, taking away any sense of autonomy you may have.

"You're self-esteem goes down and you give up," Miens said. "It's time for New York State to get their butts up and do what they are supposed to do for the people."

This idea of barriers and inaccessibility issues was a recurring theme at the press conference. Many believe shelters help to address the issue of homelessness by providing shelter, but for those living there, they said these shelters carry a lot of problems that often

go unseen in the public eye. Brett Arnold took to the podium to summarize some barriers they've seen with the shelters in Rochester.

Some of these barriers reportedly include:

Accessibility issues: Not wheelchair accessible, not trauma-informed and no pets or support animals allowed.

Availability and county policies: Shelters are usually full, hospitality placements are not allowed, hospitality placement is "maxed out" by shelters, they cost money for people who are "over income" like if they receive Supplemental Security Income or are employed and they do not take DHS-sanctioned people.

Service challenges: Staff burnout, reports of belongings theft, drug supplies are confiscated, early and strict curfews and highly limiting rules at shelters. All of these barriers, Arnold said, make going to a shelter not as easy as it may seem. "So it's for this reason that we are calling for low-bar-

rier shelters for all," he said.

Isabell Rosa concluded the press conference by going over Resistance's list of demands. Their demands include:

- "Make a municipal commitment not to arrest or fine people for sleeping in public areas.
- Stop the "sweeps" of homeless encampments, including ending confiscation of individuals' personal property.
- Remove all hostile architecture.
- Provide Housing for All: an apartment for each houseless person.
- Create No-barrier Shelter: Meet people where they are, as they are.

• Fund Housing for All: direct tax on rental income or a countywide tax on sale of property.

• Create a Housing Task Force to advise policy changes (Overdose Prevention Centers, overhaul of DHS sanctions, MH community-based housing funding, housing vouchers)"

What are the next steps?

County Legislator Rachel Barnhart stood with the Resistance members during the press conference. She said she has received and supports the group's list of demands and is now working with her colleagues to come up

with some sort of resolution.

"A resolution may not have the force of law, but it certainly would send a message that legislators do not want to see our homeless population harmed in this way," Barnhart said. "These demands are reasonable. No one should be arrested for sleeping outside, no one should be arrested because they're poor."

Barnhart believes that the county can do a lot more to address the problem of homelessness, but has been making conscientious decisions not to. According to Barnhart, Monroe County will be ending the year with a \$169 million surplus, but next month, she said, they will be voting on whether or not to transfer \$6 million out of Human Services.

So, what's next? Rosa, who was last to speak at the conference, said many group members have been meeting weekly to come up with different strategies to address these issues. She said they plan to get more specific with their demands, especially with Monroe County about the issues around sanctioning.

"We're just gonna continue to fight and continue to try to break these barriers so that people can have safe homes to live in warm homes," Rosa said.

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