



IN THE NEWS

Denby Fawcett: Homeless Keep Coming Back To Diamond Head

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By Denby Fawcett / Civil Beat

The state plans a new sweep in February. Campers will be offered services most don't want, then forced to leave. After the land is cleared, most will return.

The state plans to evict homeless people encamped on the slopes of Diamond Head next month.

That would mean the ouster of 50-70 people now living in tents or under tarps in kiawe thickets above the Diamond Head Lighthouse. Some of them have been there for more than 20 years.

But unless the city joins the sweep, it doesn't include the homeless people encamped on oceanside cliffs — they are under the city's jurisdiction.

State Homeless Coordinator Scott Morishige says the action is needed to remove trash that has built up at the homeless encampments.

Safety is a key issue, he said, because “the steep slopes of the crater are not a safe place for anybody to live, not just the homeless, but anybody. There are some precarious places up there. That’s why the state has made it a closed area, off-limits to the public. Diamond Head is not like other parks.”

Diamond Head neighbors have also been concerned about the possibility of brush fires breaking out.

“They can walk across Kapiolani Park into Waikiki in the evening to panhandle, make a few bucks and come back here to sleep all day. It’s a lifestyle.” — Justin Phillips, Institute for Human Services

Morishige dislikes calling the upcoming Diamond Head homeless eviction a “sweep.”

“That sounds too negative,” he says, preferring to call it “an enforcement of existing rules.”

There are 13 signs along the mountainside on Diamond Head Road reading, “Closed Area. Do Not Go Beyond This Sign.” At the bottom of the sign is a listing of the state rules that apply.

Interestingly, the signs also serve as trail markers to the steep, illegal paths the homeless campers follow up to their tent and tarp homes.

“They are here because they like living off the grid,” says homeless outreach worker Justin Phillips. “It’s only a short walk into Waikiki to get access to services they need. They can walk across Kapiolani Park into Waikiki in the evening to panhandle, make a few bucks and come back here to sleep all day. It’s a lifestyle.”

Phillips is the outreach field manager for the Institute for Human Services. IHS was recently awarded a contract by the state to bring outreach services to Windward and East Oahu, including Diamond Head.

On Thursday, I accompanied Phillips and a 10-member team of IHS outreach workers as they did interviews for the annual Homeless Persons Point-in-Time Count on Diamond Head.

Community volunteers were not allowed on this count because of the steep terrain.

Hiking up the slopes, we saw a lot of trash piled up in front of abandoned camps. A heap of garbage near one former encampment was filled with used hypodermic needles.

I asked Phillips if he thought the area was the former home of a heroin user.

“The person could have been a diabetic,” he said. “But hey, that’s just me being nice. Could have been a crystal meth or heroin or cocaine user.”

Many of Diamond Head campers have mental health and substance abuse problems. They fit the category of the “chronic homeless” that Morishige says the state will focus on helping this year.

He says the Diamond Head tent dwellers are different from other homeless populations because of their quest for privacy and solitude.

Morishige says the Division of State Parks of the Department of Land and Natural Resources will conduct the upcoming sweep in coordination with his office and outreach workers from IHS.

“We want to make sure there is adequate notice as well as continuous outreach to connect them to services.” — Scott Morishige, state homeless coordinator

The city is responsible for the oceanside of Diamond Head, where other homeless encampments dot the cliffs. Morishige says the city is aware of the upcoming operation.

Morishige says IHS social service providers will make repeated visits to Diamond Head before the sweep to inform the campers about housing options and services to help them with their move.

“We want to make sure there is adequate notice as well as continuous outreach to connect them to services,” says Morishige.

The date has not been made public yet for the sweep. In an email, DLNR communications director Dan Dennison said, “We do not talk about future, planned or pending law enforcement operations in advance.”

Late last year, State Parks Division administrator Curt Cottrell tried unsuccessfully in two forays up the sides of Diamond Head to get campers to leave voluntarily.

On Nov. 9 and Dec. 2, Cottrell’s team left notices to vacate within 48 hours at 36 homeless campsites. Cottrell’s team also issued six criminal citations for illegal camping and closed-area violations. But most of the campers refused to go.

The state tried to clear Diamond Head of illegal campers in sweeps in July 2014 and September 2015. But many of the former campers returned and increasing numbers of new campers gradually joined them.

Neighbors remember the 2014 sweep as particularly dramatic because the Division of State Parks used a helicopter to remove piles of garbage that the homeless campers abandoned on some of the higher slopes of the crater.

DLNR spokeswoman Deborah Ward says the helicopter had been hired already to drop off building materials for a trail building project underway at the time inside the crater.

“They were flying empty at times and were able to provide help to make a sling load of trash from the exterior slope that parks staff bagged. They were short and simple flights into the crater floor to a dumpster once the hook was attached to the sling loads.”

In the upcoming sweep, if the campers refuse to move out after the required postings to vacate, Morishige says their possessions will be considered “abandoned or seized property” to be hauled off and stored. The campers will be given 30 days to reclaim their possessions from storage.

DLNR says one of its conundrums is determining what can be considered rubbish to be discarded and what counts as a homeless person’s possessions to be put in storage.

If the past is a clue, the homeless will gradually return.

Bernadette Anderson, who was interviewed by the Homeless Persons Point-In Time canvassers Thursday, [told me last month](#) she’d never leave Diamond Head.

Anderson said then that even if the bunker where she now lives was filled with rocks to keep her out, she would crawl back in.

“They don’t want help,” Phillips says. “They don’t want services. Most of them are resigned to living there for free. They don’t want to be a part of society.”

Morishige says, “It will be a continuous effort. You have to get started somewhere to clean up Diamond Head, to enforce the rules and to help those willing to accept housing.”

He says only a handful of people, maybe three or four, have agreed to move off the crater to seek services and housing. But he remains optimistic.

“That may sound like very few,” he says. “But when even a few find housing, it has an impact. When others on Diamond Head hear about it through the coconut wireless, they slowly become interested. We begin to get calls inquiring about help.”