

Verbal Testimony

2023 Special Committee on Homelessness

Thursday, November 9, 2023

Dear Chairman Awerkamp and members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Hill-Nelson, and I am the Owner/Operator of The Bowersock Mills & Power Company, which is the hydroelectric power plant located on the Kansas River in Lawrence. We have two facilities, one located on the south side of the river below City Hall, and the other on the north side of the river adjacent to Johnny's Tavern.

I am concerned for our Staff Safety

We first noticed the surge in camping in late 2019, and for the past four years, our staff has been dealing with increasing interactions with people camping and moving through the river corridor. Several months ago one person was murdered several hundred feet from where we park our cars at the South Plant, and in an unrelated and subsequent incident several weeks later someone was stabbed in the neck twelve times several hundred feet from where we park to access our North Plant. On a daily basis our staff has to drive through the campers located in and adjacent to the City-run New Beginnings Camp. Our facilities run 24x7, and staff is on call to attend to issues at all hours of the night. I have issued our entire staff tasers, but this brings limited additional comfort when we are aware that virtually all the people who are camping must (for even just their own personal protection) be weaponized. Most often we have experienced that they are equipped with knives or large pipes. Our staff has been threatened by a person with a large pipe, and I have experienced two incidents, one in which I was approached by an aggressive male and verbally assaulted while I was in my car, and a second when I was chased on foot. We regularly find stashes of weapons around our facility.

Most of the individuals with whom we are interacting have severe drug and mental health issues, and exhibit highly erratic behavior. Most of the violence that we have witnessed or are aware of has been homeless on homeless. Our communities should be safe for all individuals, housed and unhoused. That said, as the person responsible for running the plant, I am asking my staff on a daily basis to enter into an area which has a very high incidence of violence, often at the darkest times of the night, when many of the campers are the most active, and armed.

Environmental Issues

In addition to the safety issues referenced, Bowersock is also very concerned about the environmental damage that is associated with unsanctioned camping. If you have not been into an unsanctioned encampment, I strongly encourage you to visit one, because you will be presented conditions that are deeply disturbing. Cities have building codes for a reason. People that are living in encampments are urinating and defecating without any sanitary facilities. Tents and clothing are regularly abandoned, and encampments are full of trash, fecal matter, drug paraphernalia such as needles, and general junk, such as bicycle parts. When it rains, all of that trash goes straight into the Kansas River. I will underscore that

although our City water treatment plants test for many chemicals, meth, fentanyl, and tranq are not on the list of chemicals for which they test. That is our drinking water.

The Problem

I am concerned that we have been defining the “Homeless Problem,” as a “high cost of housing,” problem, when I believe that for the people we encounter, the problem is not high cost of housing, but rather serious drug addiction. Throughout the last four years, our entire staff has interacted regularly with individuals that are unhoused, and we can say with a high level of confidence that every person with whom we have interacted presents as someone that is suffering from substance use disorder or severe mental illness. When we asked Lawrence police officers to help us understand these people’s erratic behavior, they explained that the “New Meth,” was destroying people’s brains, and rendering them almost incapable of functioning. We have seen this to be the case. The individuals with whom we are interacting are not people who have lost their homes due to a run of bad luck or high hospital bills. Several people have told me that they chose to live on the street. One explained that it started as “kind of an adventure, like it would be cool to try to survive on the street.” All of them acknowledge drug use when asked. As a community, it is much easier and less painful to attribute the high incidence of homelessness to the “high cost of housing.” Just attributing the problem to the “high cost of housing,” makes the problem superficially easy to solve. My concern, however, is that just housing people that are suffering from severe drug addiction does not help. I believe that we need to openly, and without judgment, acknowledge substance use disorder as a core driver of homelessness, and work on it from that direction. People suggest that if we just put people in their own apartments that they will be OK, but it has been shown in California, Portland, and Seattle that this is not the case. When anyone (regardless of income) goes into drug rehab, they are living in some type of communal housing. We need to re-think our entire approach to this problem, with the primary focus on addressing drug addiction and mental illness. Court-enforced drug treatment has one of the highest rates of success in helping people recover from addiction. Before just “housing” people, we need to consider some kind of large-scale drug treatment options.

This is a State Wide Problem

As we meet and interact with these people we regularly ask where they are from. In the last four years I recall encountering two people who were actually from Lawrence. Most often they will explain that they are from some other town outside of Lawrence, such as Hiawatha, Melvern, Leavenworth, or Topeka. Several of them have told me that they are no longer welcome, or have “burned all [their] bridges,” in their hometowns. When I ask them why they have come to Lawrence, the answer I receive is that Lawrence makes it easy for them to be homeless, or in some cases that they were transported to Lawrence. Lawrence simply cannot handle all the Kansans suffering from substance use disorder and mental illness. I would suggest that communities across Kansas start thinking about how they can help their own children, because when these people come to Lawrence, they have no social network, and it is falling on our community to try to care for them and at the same time deal with the consequences of increasing crime and violence.

We are addressing a Special Committee on Homelessness, but this committee could potentially have more success if it were to be renamed the Committee on Addressing the Symptoms of the Opioid and Meth Crisis in Kansas. If we define the problem accurately I believe we will have a better chance of addressing it.