

Caring Public Park Management: Place-based responses to houselessness

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Abstract

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Public spaces, such as parks, are critically important for individuals experiencing houselessness, providing a place to spend the day and meet basic survival needs. While public parks and recreation services are often cited as solutions to society's most pressing issues, such as climate change and poor public health, they are rarely included in discussions about supportive responses to houselessness. Frequently, the approaches taken by public park and recreation agencies to houselessness are reactive, punitive, and enforcement driven. This dissertation argues that agencies are well-positioned to respond positively to marginalized individuals who use public spaces, and as publicly funded organizations, they have a responsibility to do so.

This study utilizes the feminist theory of an ethic of care to examine the value of responding to houseless populations through place-based approaches rooted in care. It focuses particularly on park-based care, which refers to the care practices situated within and implemented through public parks. Seventy interviewees participated in the study, including

individuals experiencing chronic houselessness and public park and recreation professionals. Collectively, they provide key insights into the complexities of managing public parks and delivering recreation services in the context of houselessness. Challenges include the dilemma of providing a finite public service amid extensive and competing needs, an ill-defined role for the profession, and the difficulties of utilizing public parks while living houseless.

Public space managers cannot solve structural social injustices, but they can control how they respond to these injustices and the values they embody in their daily practices. The study analyzes three park-based care approaches that offer a path forward for public park and recreation agencies. It examines work by the Freeway Park Association in Seattle, WA, to implement caring park programming; place-based supportive outreach efforts implemented by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District in Atlanta, GA; and DowntownDC's proactive care-based park management practices in Franklin Park, Washington, D.C. These organizations recognize that they cannot simply police their way out of houselessness. Instead, they strive to create welcoming public spaces that are inclusive, fair, and supportive for all individuals, regardless of their circumstances. This study contributes significant evidence on the value of employing public parks as spaces of care to meet society's collective needs.

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Section I: Context

Chapter One: Caring Public Park Management and Place-based Responses to Houselessness

Overview

High-quality, well-maintained public parks and recreation services positively shape places by helping communities to thrive (CABE Space, 2004; Konijnendijk et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2022; NRPA, 2023). They contribute to vibrant, welcoming places, attracting people and inviting them in to spend time, meet friends, picnic, play, relax, exercise, and celebrate (TPL, 2021). Public parks and recreation services also serve as a metaphorical canary in the coal mine; they can be an important barometer of an area's quality and the challenges it may be facing. Poorly maintained, neglected, or empty parks and facilities signal underlying issues. Low-quality amenities indicate an area might be struggling with a lack of resources or local prioritization, poverty, a shortage of affordable housing, or public safety concerns (Jacobs, 1993; Gilmore, 2017).

Among the many real and perceived problems that public parks can indicate or reflect, one of the most significant issues in the 21st century is houselessness.¹ The 2025 State of Public Space Survey conducted by the Project for Public Space reports that houselessness is the second most pressing issue faced by public space professionals today (PPS, 2025).² Interventions that

¹ Central to the term “houselessness” is the idea of inadequate shelter. Houseless individuals are those who sleep outside or use public or private shelters (Springer, 2000, p. 475). This chapter's section on terminology also discusses this.

² After “war, terrorism, and aging infrastructure” (PPS, 2025).

utilize park spaces and recreation amenities provide multiple benefits (PPS, 2025). There is an extensive and growing body of research across various disciplines that evidences the significant health, social, environmental, and economic value contributed by public park and recreation services. However, the potential value of U.S. public park and recreation agencies in addressing issues related to houselessness or in supporting individuals experiencing houselessness in using their spaces is largely absent from analyses and public policy discussions about this challenging issue.

This dissertation is underpinned by the belief that, in the face of extreme poverty and systemic structural injustice, park and recreation agencies, as publicly funded institutions, have a social responsibility to respond thoughtfully and actively to individuals experiencing houselessness who use their spaces. Publicly funded agencies in the United States have historically played a leading role in trying to tackle houselessness.³ By the time a person turns to a public park for shelter, it is likely reflective of a long line of institutional and societal failures. Therefore, agencies may need to adapt or change their management and service delivery models to create more caring services in parks, thereby enhancing the benefits they provide to communities and contributing to more socially just places.

This study examines the current, and ideal, responsibilities of public park and recreation agencies in the context of increasing numbers of individuals experiencing houselessness and explores their potential role going forward in better utilizing their spaces and amenities to support unhoused individuals and connect them with essential services. The research considers

³ In 2024 there was a proposed \$10.3 billion in federal funding targeted for houselessness assistance programs (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2023). The current administration is committed to overhauling policy and redirecting federal funding with likely severe reductions in investment (The White House, 2025).

the value of moving away from reactive or enforcement-driven responses, which often lead to park closures or access limitations, towards grounding public park management and recreation service delivery in an ethic of care. It focuses on how care can be rooted in the practices of agencies and the value of these in reaching society's most marginalized individuals. It examines the value of place-based care practices located in and enacted through specific public locations, particularly park-based care, the care practices situated within and enacted through public parks.

Three urban case studies, drawn from Seattle, WA, Atlanta, GA, and Washington, D.C., offer positive examples of how public parks can be strategically used to enact practices of care to address issues related to houselessness, while also providing high-quality, accessible, and enjoyable environments for all users.⁴ These articulations of alternative ways of working provide valuable insights into successfully implementing place-based care practices in response to houselessness.

Study Context

The context of this research is complex. Houselessness is a wicked problem characterized by contention and no one clear “right” answer (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010; Ensign, 2024). There is no consensus among policymakers on the way forward in addressing houselessness and there are no straightforward or easy solutions to the issue of people seeking shelter in parks.

Parks and recreation amenities are often cited as valuable assets in addressing an extensive range of critical environmental and societal challenges, including climate change (Chiesura, 2004; Cranz & Boland, 2005; Bowler et al., 2010), emergency events (Campbell et al., 2016; Slater et

⁴ The study's lessons are applicable to any area experiencing a rise in unsheltered houselessness.

al., 2020), income-related inequities (Mitchell & Popham, 2008; CABE Space, 2010), health and wellbeing (Larson et al., 2016; Dietz, 2025), social cohesion (Low et al., 2005; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019), and economic deprivation (TPL, 2013, 2024; Schundler et al., 2015).⁵

Furthermore, the public park and recreation champion, the National Recreation and Park Association, states that the profession has a critical role in achieving social equity: “Social equity is a critical responsibility borne by every public park and recreation agency and the professionals that operate them. It is a right, not just a privilege, for people nationwide to have safe healthful access to parks and recreation” (NRPA, 2012).⁶

Yet the potential role of public park and recreation agencies in supporting solutions to homelessness has received limited attention. There is currently a lack of well-developed research on how public park and recreation agencies respond to homelessness, with few published best practices or evidence-based solutions addressing the impact on amenities and spaces. There is little research focusing on public parks as environments or spaces of care for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Therefore, park and recreation professionals lack sufficient information to inform their responses to homelessness. A key challenge is the damage that public park spaces and recreation amenities can incur from being used for shelter. This damage, and the fear that spaces will be negatively impacted, leads to strategies aimed at restricting their use by unhoused communities. Additionally, it is unclear whether the public park and recreation profession sees a role for itself concerning homelessness, even though these agencies are frequently involved in responses, for

⁵ Emergency events include for example, natural disasters or pandemic events.

⁶ The NRPA facilitates a network of over 60,000 park and recreation professionals and advocates (www.nrpa.org/about-national-recreation-and-park-association/).

example, the provision of free shower facilities, or shelter during emergencies, such as extreme weather events (NRPA, 2017; Colman & Barrett, 2022).

Role of Park and Recreation Agencies

This study proposes that, with the right planning, support, and funding, public parks and recreation amenities can play a vital role in supporting individuals experiencing houselessness without compromising the services they offer to other groups in society. While there are no easy answers, leveraging public park and recreation assets to enable support for individuals experiencing houselessness holds significant potential to positively impact the lives of society's most marginalized members.

Public park and recreation professionals are well-positioned to understand the diverse needs of their users and to collaborate with other organizations to address them. They are accustomed to balancing the diverse needs of their users and experienced in building partnerships. High-quality park and recreation management goes beyond simply ensuring spaces are open and amenities are provided in a clean state. It includes ensuring people feel welcome, comfortable, and safe accessing parks, engaging communities in decisions about spaces, and working to ensure all social groups can access spaces (Green Flag, 2016).⁷

Public park and recreation agencies could be a valuable component of local caring responses to houselessness. They could help build holistic pathways to care, providing place-based care by facilitating support in the spaces and places that individuals experiencing

⁷Administered by Keep Britain Tidy and supported by the UK Government, the Green Flag Award is a scheme that works internationally, accrediting well-managed, high-quality parks and green spaces. The U.S. has two Green Flag Awards, Seward Park, Seattle, and The Presidio, San Francisco (www.greenflagaward.org/).

houselessness already frequent. The three city case studies provide practical examples of new ways to approach park management and service delivery through the lens of care. By fostering the creation of long-term, supportive policies, public park and recreation agencies can respond thoughtfully to their unhoused visitors and move away from short-term, reactive approaches to better meet society's collective needs.

Research Questions

The aim of the study is to develop practical evidence regarding the role of public park and recreation agencies in responding to houselessness. It questions the traditional understanding of how these services are managed and delivered and calls for a consideration of the value of adopting more caring and compassionate models for park and recreation management. The study's central overarching question is: "What could an ethic of care look like in the management of public parks and the delivery of recreation services in the context of houselessness?"

The following supplementary questions structure the study's investigation into the potential for more caring models of public park and recreation management:

1. What are the realities of managing and delivering park and recreation amenities in the context of unsheltered houselessness?
 - a. What insights does the literature provide regarding the management of public parks and recreational amenities amid houselessness?
 - b. Do public park and recreation professionals recognize a responsibility for their field regarding houselessness?

2. In what ways are values of care or compassion expressed or interpreted in relation to public park management and recreation service delivery?
 - a. What does the literature tell us about an ethic of care and the management of parks and the delivery of recreation services?
 - b. What are the different ways in which care is articulated or practiced in relation to contemporary park management policy or practice in the three case cities?
 - c. What insights do these examples provide about the potential practical application of an ethic of care in public park and recreation management overall?
 - d. What are the challenges and opportunities in applying values of care to public parks and recreation?
3. How might the consideration of care potentially change American park management?
 - a. In what tangible ways can public parks and recreation amenities serve as spaces of care?
 - b. What are the opportunities and challenges for future policy and practice?

An ethic of care has not received attention in the urban studies literature. It has attracted less focus than other justice-based urban theories and is largely absent from theorizations of the just city or within conceptualizations of public policy (Tronto, 2010; Low & Iveson, 2016; Williams, 2017; Gabauer et al., 2021). It is often seen as being in tension with justice theories due to its relational social ontology and emphasis on context and responsiveness, although this tension does not align with the thinking of early care ethicists (Williams, 2017). Furthermore, analysis of the influence of spatial context in relation to the practice of care is often missing from the literature, which has instead focused on who provides care rather than the importance of place (Phillips, 2007).

Study Focus

The study examines three case studies and involves 70 research participants, including individuals experiencing chronic houselessness. Most of the study's participants (50) either work or reside in the City of Seattle.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in two stages. The first stage focused on Seattle, WA, aiming to gather insights and build knowledge on managing parks and recreational amenities amid houselessness there. The second stage explored different approaches to providing park-based care for individuals experiencing houselessness drawn from three cities: Seattle, (Freeway Park), Atlanta, (Woodruff Park), and Washington, D.C. (Franklin Park). The city case studies focus on people who are chronically unsheltered, defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as someone who has been living in places unfit for human habitation for at least 12 months, for example public parks, or other public spaces, and may also be struggling with other conditions such as mental illness or addiction (HUD, 2015, 2024b).

The City of Seattle is of interest because it has the fourth-largest population of people experiencing houselessness in the United States, with a notably high rate (58%) of those individuals experiencing unsheltered houselessness (HUD, 2024a, 2024b). In response, the city has implemented a wide range of policies and on-the-ground measures responding to individuals using its public spaces for shelter. These responses include some of the nation's strictest regulations, which legally authorize some park officials to ban individuals from city parks for up to a year (Beckett & Herbert, 2010). The study focuses on care-based park programming by the Freeway Park Association in Freeway Park, a park in downtown Seattle that is frequently used by individuals experiencing houselessness.

The Atlanta, GA, and Washington, D.C. case study parks are located in areas that are managed and operated by Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): privately directed and managed, but publicly sanctioned organizations. They are included in this study because they provide practical examples of alternative approaches of working within parks to respond to houselessness that could be adopted by other public park and recreation agencies. Care-based park management in Franklin Park, a historic space in the heart of downtown D.C., seeks to understand and respond to the needs of individuals by connecting them with supportive services and creating a welcoming environment. Supportive park-based outreach services in Atlanta's Woodruff Park, a well-used open space downtown, are offered to individuals experiencing houselessness. These services include long-term engagement to help people access housing, employment and other essential support services, which require time to establish.

Terminology

This dissertation uses the terms “houseless,” “houselessness,” or “unhoused” instead of the more commonly used terms “homeless” or “homelessness.” The term homelessness can carry stigmatizing connotations (Phelan et al., 1997; Springer, 2000; Chauhan & Foster, 2025). Furthermore, this contrasts with how individuals living in alternative dwellings, such as tents or vehicles, can view their circumstances and their living spaces. For example, some unhoused people consider these structures their home – places where they feel safe or connected to a community (Pruss, 2023). One chronically unhoused participant in this study, Tammy, has lived in encampments in the same area for a decade.⁸ She takes pride in keeping her tent clean and cozy, values living among others, and feels her best surrounded by trees and nature.

⁸ Tammy is not the interviewee's real name.

At the core of the term “houselessness,” proposed by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements as a replacement for “homelessness,” is the concept of inadequate shelter (Springer, 2000).⁹ It aims to draw attention to the structural causes of houselessness, the social, political, economic, and ecological factors that deprive people of housing and contribute to their marginalization (Jobe, 2020). This study also uses the phrase “people experiencing houselessness.” The addition of “experiencing” places the focus on individuals rather than their circumstances because houselessness is a situation experienced by someone, rather than an intrinsic part of their identity.

However, there is no consensus on this terminology, and debate is ongoing. Homelessness remains the dominant terminology in national and local government policy in the United States. Some critics dislike the use of “houselessness,” arguing that it is confusing, patronizing, and cumbersome, and that it detracts from the real issues by introducing unfamiliar language (Abrams, 2023). Others contend that houselessness is too narrowly conceived; it is not just about providing a “house,” because solving the issue often requires a broader spectrum of support services to ensure people gain a home (Cheng, 2025; Oudshoorn, 2025).

This study acknowledges the merit of these arguments. Nevertheless, the dissertation opts to utilize the terms related to houselessness to avoid stigmatizing individuals, while highlighting the critical importance of funding and building accessible, affordable housing for lower-income and marginalized populations.

⁹ The predecessor to The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat).

Summary of Dissertation

The dissertation comprises 16 chapters in three sections. In “**Section I: Context,**” Chapter 2 discusses contemporary public park management and recreation service delivery. Chapter 3 explores the management of parks and the delivery of services in the context of houselessness. Chapter 4 introduces the study’s theoretical framework, focusing on an ethic of care and the concept of place-based care. Chapter 5 outlines the study’s methods and explains the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach.

In “**Section II: Seattle - Parks, Recreation, and Houselessness**” Chapters 6 through 11 focus on the City of Seattle. Chapter 6 examines the city context and its responses to houselessness, and Chapter 7 discusses the provision of park and recreation services in Seattle. Chapter 8 focuses on the impact of high levels of unsheltered houselessness on these services and explores Seattle Park and Recreation (SPR) interviewees’ perceptions regarding the responsibility of public park and recreation agencies in responding to houselessness. Chapter 9 examines the SPR interviewees’ perspectives on how the idea of care relates to park management, and their ideas for the future direction of these services. Chapter 10 presents the perspectives of individuals experiencing chronic houselessness who rely on public parks and recreation amenities for their daily needs, including their aspirations for these spaces. Chapter 11 discusses the key themes identified from the fieldwork in Seattle and offers recommendations to guide public park and recreation agencies toward more structured, strategic, and long-term approaches to houselessness.

In “**Section III: Place-Based Care,**” Chapters 12 through 14 outline the three city case studies and discuss the care-based approaches implemented in each city. Chapter 15 reflects upon

lessons learned from the case studies, and the practicalities involved in delivering place-based care. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the potential of place-based care for future public park and recreation management and highlights evidence gaps, along with recommendations for future policy and practice (Chapter 16).

Chapter Two: Public Parks and Recreation - Value, Ideals, and Inequities

Introduction

The public park and recreation system is a vital element of America’s public infrastructure. Across the United States, over 10,000 public park and recreation agencies employ more than 326,000 full-time and part-time employees and manage more than 11 million acres of open spaces along with recreation amenities, leisure facilities, and community centers.¹⁰ Parks and Recreation agencies also deliver extensive community programming, events, and classes (NRPA, n.d. -a, 2023).

Projects and programs based in public spaces – such as urban public parks – provide an opportunity to tackle problems at their roots by reaching people in the spaces they regularly use (Sawin, 2018; PPS, 2025).¹¹ While agencies are commonly involved in wellness initiatives, programs for those with disabilities, activities to connect communities to nature, and outreach to economically disadvantaged communities, they are less commonly involved in systemic or strategic responses to homelessness, typically relying on reactive or crisis-driven approaches (Recreation Management, 2023a; Pitas et al., 2025a).

This chapter provides context on public park and recreation services. It begins by examining the importance of public parks and recreation, highlighting the extensive ways in which agencies support their communities, enhance local quality of life, and contribute a diverse

¹⁰ Employment data is 2021 U.S Census Bureau information analyzed by NRPA (2023).

¹¹ The Project for Public Spaces call public spaces “multi-solvers” because they can solve multiple problems with a single investment of time or money (PPS, 2025).

range of benefits. The emergence of public parks and recreation in the United States during the mid to late nineteenth century is closely tied to moral reform (Cranz, 1982; Taylor, 2009; Williams, 2009). The chapter explores the influence of these historical and normative ideals, particularly ideas about the power of nature and expected behaviors in park spaces. Today, the field of public park and recreation is complex, shaped by social, political, and economic agendas (Cranz, 1982; Razack, 2007). The chapter concludes by examining contemporary inequities in the quantity and quality of park spaces and recreation amenities.

The Value of Public Parks and Recreation

Early advocates for public urban parks argued that establishing publicly accessible green spaces in cities would provide essential places for individuals to socialize, exercise, relax, and enjoy clean air while being around nature. Conceived as the “green lungs” of the city, these spaces were promoted by advocates in England and later in the United States by proponents such as Frederick Law Olmsted, as beneficial for public health and community cohesion, offering restorative and calming effects (Cranz, 1982; Taylor, 2009). Today, high-quality parks and recreation services offer significant value to their local communities. Furthermore, the variety of green features offered by a park system is important. Cities that provide daily opportunities for interaction with nature, including a range of green spaces such as parks, have been shown to positively impact multiple aspects of well-being (Beatley & Newman, 2013; Larson et al., 2016).

In recent years, investment in urban parks has increased significantly. In 2024, the 100 most populous U.S. cities allocated \$12.2 billion to their park and recreation systems, up from

\$9.7 billion in 2022 (ASCE, 2025; Klein et al., 2025).¹² Despite these funding increases, many public park and recreation agencies are facing challenging circumstances, working in the context of a changing climate, growing urban inequity, increasing childhood obesity, an aging population, and the ongoing trauma from a global pandemic (NRPA, 2022; PPS, 2025). Additional uncertainties include proposed deep funding cuts to national parks and delays or cancellations to federally administered grant funding (PPS, 2025).

Although the value of parks and recreation is generally recognized by most local government decision-makers, the sources of public funding for these services are often vulnerable to cuts. A 2017 survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) of city leaders in all 50 states reported that nearly all local government officials agreed that their communities benefit from local park areas and recreation services (99% and 98%, respectively). However, they also perceived parks and recreation spending as “discretionary” and likely to be cut in times of local budgetary pressure (NRPA, 2017a).¹³

Nonetheless, contemporary park and recreation systems play a crucial role in building thriving communities. They contribute to public health, foster social connections and community resilience, provide environmental benefits, generate economic value, and help address social inequities. The following sections examine each of those aspects.

¹² The \$12.2 billion figure refers to revenue/operational costs as well as capital funding. Deferred maintenance does continue to rise (ASCE, 2025). Funding cuts in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to an estimated deferred maintenance backlog for municipal parks of around \$65 billion (Klein, 2022). Additionally, future federal funding for national parks may decrease under the Trump administration (National Parks Conservation Association, 2026).

¹³ Galen Cranz notes that because public parks are free, tax-supported amenities rather than fee-based services, they are vulnerable to political cycles and changing priorities. Due to their traditional association as a leisure amenity rather than necessity, they are treated as less essential than other public services (Cranz, 1982, p. 175).

Public Health

Access to public parks and recreation amenities offers significant physical and mental health benefits, particularly for individuals living on low incomes (CDC, n.d.; Hartig et al., 2003, 2014; TPL, 2023; Lu et al., 2026).¹⁴ High-quality, well-maintained park spaces encourage and increase levels of physical activity (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2007, 2016; Schipperijn, 2017). These health-inducing behaviors, in turn, contribute to the resilience of individuals and households, enabling them to cope more effectively with other stressors (Beatley & Newman, 2013). The availability of free or low-cost recreational facilities or participation in organized park and recreation programming is also associated with better physical and mental health, as well as improved or higher self-reported health status (Po'e et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Peterson, 2017; Pitas et al., 2017; Andrade et al., 2021).

Additionally, contact with nature in parks and green spaces reduces stress and improves mental health (Maller et al., 2006; Burls, 2007; Bratman, 2012; Wood et al., 2017; Dietz, 2025). “Green prescription” initiatives encourage individuals to visit green spaces to take advantage of their health benefits. For example, Park RX America includes over 80 U.S. programs where doctors and healthcare professionals issue medical prescriptions recommending that patients visit local parks (WLO, 2020).

Connection and Resilience

Public parks and community centers are meaningful spaces that facilitate social interaction and build social capital and trust, which are core components of democratic and inclusive societies (Low et al., 2005; Colistra, 2017; Klinenberg, 2018; Jennings & Bamkole,

¹⁴ Also discussed in the section on addressing inequities below.

2019; Fraser et al., 2024). Park and recreation professionals interact closely with the individuals visiting their spaces and using recreational services. On average, Americans visit local parks and recreational facilities more than twice a month, with the typical local agency registering approximately 225,000 contacts each year (NRPA, 2020; ASCE, 2021). Research by the NRPA found that 91% of Americans agree that easy access to low or no-cost fitness and educational opportunities at local recreation or community centers enhances their community (NRPA, 2019).

Klinenberg (2018) identifies public parks, playgrounds, athletic fields, and swimming pools as vital elements of social infrastructure.¹⁵ These material structures provide accessible spaces where diverse groups of people can gather and build connections. Such social infrastructure can play a critical role in promoting community resilience during emergencies - such as hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, or extreme hot or cold weather - by offering safe shelter, distributing supplies, support, and information (Klinenberg, 2018).

Environmental Benefits

High-quality parks and public green spaces are significant resources contributing to ecological sustainability and building resilience in the face of climate change (Cranz & Boland, 2004). Their key functions include cooling air temperatures, alleviating the urban heat island effect, supporting biodiversity, and managing excess stormwater (Harnik & Welle, 2009; Konijnendijk et al., 2013; Trust for Public Land, 2022; NRPA, 2023).

Bowler et al. (2010) found that urban parks are, on average, approximately 1°C (33.8 °F) cooler than non-green sites, with larger parks producing stronger cooling effects (Bowler et al.,

¹⁵ Social infrastructure is defined as the spaces and places that build social capital. “When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors.” (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 5).

2010).¹⁶ Parks mitigate the urban heat island effect by providing shade or evapotranspiration. Some studies examine how various elements – such as topography or the characteristics of nearby urban forms – affect the intensity of this cooling effect (Feyisa et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2022). This evidence is valuable for improving the design of public parks to enhance their cooling effects and reduce residents’ risk of heat stress.

Moreover, there is strong evidence that parks play a vital role in supporting biodiversity. The NRPA emphasizes that public park and recreation agencies are important in promoting and sustaining local biodiversity in four important ways: creating plans to protect biodiversity, for instance by identifying priority areas for conservation, establishing and maintaining protected areas, offering educational programming to raise awareness, and collaborating with conservation organizations to share expertise and resources (Lau, 2023).

Economic Value

A developing body of evidence shows that high-quality park systems generate economic value by reducing health care spending, enhancing property values, and providing savings via the provision of essential environmental services (Harnik & Welle, 2009; Cohen et al., 2022; TPL, 2022).¹⁷ For instance, research involving over five million members of Kaiser Permanente Northern California calculated that greater levels of residential green cover decrease annual health costs by approximately \$374 per person per year (Van Den Eeden et al., 2022). High-

¹⁶ Reported in the unit of measurement used in the research. Other studies have reported a wider range, for example, Yan et al (2018) state that extensive field-based measurements have demonstrated that urban parks are usually 0.5–4 °C and sometimes even 5–7 °C cooler than surrounding urban built-up areas.

¹⁷ It is not possible to place a financial value on all the benefits parks provide – the intangible value contributed by high-quality parks is immeasurable.

quality public parks increase the property value of nearby residential areas and the prices of commercial properties (Crompton, 2001; CABE Space, 2004a).¹⁸ Private developers recognize the economic benefits from investing in the public realm (ASLA, 2026). Conversely, the section below (“Contribution of Public Parks to Inequities”) discusses the negative social impacts of green gentrification.

An assessment of the benefits provided by the Washington State Parks system calculated that the state’s forests, waters, and parks deliver between \$20 billion and \$148 billion in ecosystem benefits (Koefod et al., 2025). Urban public parks can also contribute significant value. For instance, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) estimates that New York City’s parks save up to \$2.43 billion each year by absorbing excess water, resulting in significant savings in avoided stormwater management and treatment costs (TPL, 2022).

The operational activities and spending by public park and recreation agencies create additional economic value. Research conducted by the NRPA and the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University (2023) found that in 2021, park and recreation agencies generated more than \$201 billion in economic activity and supported over a million jobs through their operational and capital expenditures (NRPA, 2023).¹⁹

Addressing Inequities

Finally, there is evidence of the importance of publicly funded park and recreation agencies in addressing inequities in the distribution and quality of public parks and green spaces (CABE Space, 2010; Beck et al., 2024). Tackling these inequities helps improve community

¹⁸ Conversely a poorly maintained public park can adversely impact property values (Crompton, 2001).

¹⁹ Their operational and capital spending as well as visitor spending.

health. A key study by Mitchell and Popham found that improving access to green spaces can reduce the significant gap in life expectancy between higher and lower-income groups (2008). Additionally, a systematic review of 90 peer-reviewed articles by Rigolon et al. (2021) concluded that public green spaces have important potential to reduce health disparities for lower socio-economic status groups and advance health equity.

Fewer studies focus on the positive effects of green space for Black and minority populations (Rigolon et al., 2021). Research in England suggests that improving the quality of urban green spaces encourages more active use by minority communities (CABE Space, 2010). A study conducted in Philadelphia examined mortality by poverty and race and concluded that urban green spaces may be associated with reduced racialized mortality inequities (Schinas et al., 2023). Further investigation is needed to understand how public parks and green spaces can address racial inequities.

Beck et al. (2024) explored the emerging use of equity-focused resource planning by 17 North American public park and open space management agencies. These agencies are noteworthy for developing equity-based assessments to inform their resource distribution and investment planning strategies, a practice not yet widespread in the field.²⁰ Equity-driven planning departs from traditional equality-focused models, which allocate equal resources to every area, by ensuring that marginalized areas receive an appropriate allocation of resources and amenities. These assessments involve analyzing historical allocations to identify under-invested areas that recognize communities with the greatest need, and leverage investments in public

²⁰ Grabowski et al. (2023) reviewed 122 U.S. city green infrastructure plans and found only 11% defined equity and only 10% identified the causes of the uneven distribution of green and open spaces and amenities.

parks to advance local equity and justice (Beck et al., 2024). The historical inequities in the provision of public parks and recreation services are also discussed below.

Influence of Historical Ideals on Contemporary Park Services

The social history of the U.S. park movement provides essential context for understanding the important influences on contemporary public park and recreation services and their responses relating to houselessness. The emergence of leisure in North America is closely tied to moral reform (Williams, 2009). The utopian ideals championed by early park reformers, and later developed in public park and recreation development, continue to shape the values of today's services. These influence perceptions of how spaces should function and expectations for the types of services that should be provided. Additionally, they shape and inform norms regarding appropriate behavior and use in parks (Cranz, 1982; Stormann, 1991; Young, 1995; Taylor, 2009; Gabriel, 2011; Larson, 2018; Loughran, 2020). The norms and expectations related to behavior in parks are examined below, along with a later section in this chapter that explores the assumption that public parks are universally beneficial (see p. 28).

Utopian Ideals

Early park advocates in the mid-nineteenth century were genteel men, primarily wealthy, white men from the Northeast U.S., referred to as an “American aristocracy” (Stormann, 1991, p. 137). These advocates believed that parks would foster a better society because social problems stemmed from urban residents' alienation from nature (Young, 1995; Taylor, 2009). Public parks were championed as an antidote to the busy and crowded conditions of American city life, exerting a calming, socializing, and civilizing effect by offering access to nature and spaces for respite and gentle leisure activities (Cranz, 1982; Rosenfield, 1989; Taylor, 2009).

Nature was perceived as intrinsically beneficial, with immersion in natural environments positive for the mind and body. Early parks advocates were reluctant to include too many amenities in spaces, focusing instead on passive forms of recreation such as promenading, sitting, or picnicking (Cranz, 1982). They believed that exposure to uncrowded, serene pastoral landscapes and picturesque scenery would calm and tranquilize, elevating visitors to a higher plane of thought (Young, 1995; Taylor, 2009). Parks were conceptualized as spaces that were distinct from cities, serving as places to visit for the day before returning home or going back to work (Gabriel, 2011). This ideal of parks as a place to visit, separate from the amenities of home, continues to influence contemporary discussions about the services and amenities that park systems should offer.

Park reformers also thought that providing a place for all types of people to mingle and interact would cultivate a sense of common civic pride and build a stronger citizenry (Cranz, 1982; Rosenfield, 1989).²¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, in designing Central Park, aimed to create a democratic space where “all classes...with a common purpose” could come together (Larson, 2018, p. 396). Rosenfield’s analysis of Central Park argues that its founders recognized the political potential of this space as a means to foster the values required to sustain a successful democracy (Rosenfield, 1989).

However, these ideals did not encompass everyone. New public parks were white spaces, and people of color were excluded, intimidated, and harassed if they attempted to enter (Taylor, 2009, p. 239). Exclusionary and discriminatory practices were systematically embedded in park and recreation management and programming, and segregation remained a significant aspect of

²¹ White populations – people of color were not included in this visioning.

park thinking until after World War II (Cranz, 1982; Taylor, 2009). Certain city parks were the province of specific ethnic groups, and facilities such as swimming pools and recreation centers were rigidly segregated (Cranz, 1982; Wiltse, 2014). There was minimal recreational provision for minority populations. For instance, in 1932, the National Recreation Association reported that of the 606 recreation buildings in 203 cities, only 33 were designated for people of color (Cranz, 1982).

Marginalized groups resisted and challenged the provision of segregated leisure amenities. A notable example occurred in 1919 when members of Chicago's Black population sought access to the city's beaches and public parks, leading to a deadly five-day race riot. In response, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations recommended the construction of more recreational facilities in Black neighborhoods and called for desegregated access to public recreation. However, for decades, Black beachgoers continued to experience violence, and this trend continued into the 1970s (Taylor, 2009). Discrimination has endured; communities of color still face a poorer quality and quantity of public parks and recreation amenities (Rigolon et al., 2018; TPL, 2020; Chapman, 2021). These inequities in provision are examined further in this chapter.

Norms of Behavior

Since the first urban parks in the 1850s, certain behaviors within these spaces have been deemed unacceptable or socially problematic. These behaviors included gambling, consuming alcohol, sleeping, and any activities associated with energetic movement such as climbing or running. Additionally, engaging in alternative economic activities such as foraging for fruit or collecting plants was unacceptable (Mitchell, 2003; Gabriel, 2011). The behavior of working-class park users was monitored and surveilled to uphold this strict ethical code (Gabriel, 2011).

With the rise of the playground movement in the late nineteenth century, some ideas about the purpose of parks and acceptable behaviors by visitors began to change. Public parks began to be seen as valuable spaces for more active exercise and play (Cranz, 1982; Stormann, 1991). However, the focus remained on organized and directed activities that were perceived to be “virtue-generating” (Cranz, 1982; Taylor, 2009). It was not until the budget constraints of the 1930s that extensive social programming in parks began to diminish (Cranz, 1982). Today, modern park and recreation systems reflect a mix of the early ideals of passive recreation outlined above, alongside provisions for more active, sport-based recreation, and the continuing control of certain behaviors and social groups, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Public Parks Are Not Neutral

The romantic transcendentalism of the early park movement continues to resonate today in the social imaginary (Loughran, 2020; Angelo, 2021). However, public parks and recreation services are not neutral, static, or even-handed in their provision. Rather, they are complex lived spaces, shaped by a variety of historical and current social, political, and economic forces or agendas (Cranz, 1982; Ruddick, 1996; Ackerman, 2003; Razack, 2007). These forces impact responses relating to marginalized individuals using spaces and amenities, and in some cases contribute to inequity and the rise in houselessness.

Despite this complexity and the overtly moral reformative stance taken by the early advocates of public parks, Loughran (2020) notes that parks have not received significant attention in critical urban theory. Public parks carry a “benign symbolism,” and are viewed as inherently virtuous due to the positive normative meanings associated with natural green spaces

(Loughran, 2020). Relatedly, Angelo (2021) highlights endemic “green as good” assumptions prevalent in planning, challenges associated with urban life (Angelo, 2021, p. 3).

Galen Cranz (1982) challenges this lack of critical attention in her exploration of the U.S. urban park movement. Her analysis traces a succession of responses within the field to changing ideologies regarding the value and purposes of parks. She observes that visitors to public parks are subject to an accumulated set of intended moral lessons, emphasizing that public park systems are complex and adaptive. They represent:

The successive attempts to gain control over the social and physical consequences of urbanization in the context of industrial capitalism. Their past and potential use in the processes of creating social, psychological, and political order, of planning and controlling land use, and of shaping civic form and beauty make them important today (Cranz, 1982, p. xii).

In her article, “The Paradox of Parks,” Williams (2007) states that urban parks express many contradictions. On the one hand, they provide valuable habitats and enhance the well-being of cities; on the other hand, they can “express and exacerbate shifting inequalities” (Williams, 2007, p. 139). The extensive yet sometimes contradictory value of public parks and recreation services is a central theme of this study. The discussion below explores inequities in the provision of public parks and recreation, as well as the control and regulation of the behavior of specific groups using public spaces.

Public Parks and Recreation Can Contribute to Inequity

Public park and recreation systems do not serve all communities equitably (Rigolon, 2016; Beck et al., 2024). Additionally, in some cases, public parks can increase inequity by contributing to ecological or green gentrification in certain areas and the displacement of

marginalized communities (Dooling, 2009; Till, 2012; Wolch et al., 2014; Gould, 2017; Rigolon et al., 2020).

The inequities in the distribution, quantity, and quality of parks and recreation amenities are rooted in the racist history of their planning, zoning, and establishment (Taylor, 2009; Vest et al., 2023). The first public parks in America were created through the displacement of usually BIPOC communities, regardless of their land ownership.²² These parks were built on the cheapest land, which was viewed by park advocates as “wasteland,” leading to the demolition of homes belonging to the existing Black and working-class residents (Taylor, 2009).

For example, Central Park was constructed on the site of Seneca Village, one of the few areas in New York where Black communities owned property. In 1855, over half of the Black households in this village were homeowners, all of whom were displaced to make way for the park. These patterns of removal continued with the development of expensive housing around Central Park, which lacked provisions for low-income housing (Taylor, 2009).

Today, communities of color and individuals living on lower incomes have less access to high-quality public parks, recreation facilities, and programming (Boone et al., 2009; McKenzie et al., 2013; Klinenberg, 2018; Rigolon et al., 2018; EEA, 2022). People of color are three times more likely than white individuals to live in “nature-deprived” neighborhoods. Analysis by TPL reveals that parks in majority non-white neighborhoods are, on average, half as large and serve nearly five times as many people as parks in majority white neighborhoods (Landau et al., 2020;

²² Patterns of displacement continue through the creation of new public parks. For example, in 2000, in Bogotá, Columbia, residents of the downtown El Cartucho neighborhood were displaced without compensation and their homes destroyed to make way for the new “Park of the Third Millenium” (Till, 2021).

TPL, 2020; Chapman, 2021).²³ Lower-income neighborhoods also receive a poorer quality of recreation facilities and programming, which impacts their usage; parents in higher-income areas are more likely to report that their children regularly use recreation centers (McKenzie et al., 2013).

There is potential for public park and recreation agencies to help address historical inequities through equity-informed investment practices (Beck et al., 2024). Conversely, quality public park systems can exacerbate inequity by contributing to ecological or green gentrification (Dooling, 2009; Wolch et al., 2014; Gould, 2017; Rigolon et al., 2020). New housing developments and urban renewal projects that include public parks and greening initiatives have intensified historical patterns of displacement by pricing out existing residents.

Green gentrification occurs when the introduction of new parks and improvements to ecological infrastructure make areas more desirable, attracting wealthier residents. Without intentional equitable planning and interventions to offset and mitigate the impacts of improved environmental conditions, housing costs rise as new residents move into these areas, increasing demand (Wolch et al., 2014). Rising housing costs contribute to the decline of affordable housing options, a leading contributor to houselessness, disproportionately affecting communities of color and those living on lower incomes (Gould, 2017).

For example, Atlanta's Beltline, a 22-mile loop of trails and parks that has been opening in stages since 2008, has increased property values by between 17.9% and 26.6% for properties within half a mile of the Beltline (Immergluck and Balan, 2018). Immergluck and Balan criticize the Beltline development for lacking initiatives to limit the impact of property tax increases on

²³ 45 acres compared to 87 acres.

lower-income homeowners and protect renters from potential rent increases as the area becomes more desirable. Immergluck has described the Beltline development as promoting a “heavily racialized version of gentrification that has excluded lower-income, predominantly Black residents from sharing in the city’s growth” (Immergluck, 2023, para. 2).

Summary

High-quality public park and recreation systems are the backbone of successful and vibrant places. They provide numerous health, social, environmental, and economic benefits and hold significant potential to offer even more. Park and recreation professionals engage closely with visitors, providing a valuable opportunity to connect with people in the spaces they frequently use and offer a diverse range of services and programs.

However, public parks and recreation services do not serve all communities equally; there are disparities in their distribution, quantity, and quality. New or regenerated public parks continue to contribute to gentrification, displacing marginalized communities. This role of public parks in both creating and worsening inequities has received limited critical attention. Furthermore, the social history of public parks and recreation in the U.S. remains influential today. Ideas about the “proper” roles and responsibilities of this field and “normal” behavior within park spaces are rooted in a social imaginary focused on expectations of certain behaviors in public spaces.

Early park advocates sought to present public parks as spaces separate from urban life, meant primarily for visiting to enjoy nature and partake in gentle respite. In contrast to these historical ideals, many modern public parks are essential to the survival of individuals displaced by capitalism or driven out of other public spaces (Gabriel, 2011, Speer & Goldfischer, 2020).

Public parks are being used as shelter by some individuals experiencing houselessness, or as a resource for meeting their basic human needs. The following chapter focuses on public park management and the provision of recreation services in the context of the increasing rates of houselessness in the United States.

Chapter Three: Public Parks, Recreation, and Houselessness

Introduction

Public parks were not originally conceived as spaces to meet people's daily shelter and survival needs. However, in the contemporary context of a chronic shortage of affordable housing and affordability crises in many cities in the United States, they are being used in this way. Individuals experiencing houselessness access park and recreation facilities to fulfill basic sanitation needs, find privacy, rest and respite, forge social connections, foster community, and, in some cases, seek overnight shelter or to make a home (Dooling, 2009; Rose, 2019; Speer & Goldfischer, 2020; Madison & Moses, 2022).²⁴ Consequently, park and recreation agencies are increasingly becoming frontline responders to issues related to houselessness (NRPA, 2017b).

Public parks and recreation services already contribute extensive value to the communities they serve. Staff members from park and recreation agencies are well-positioned within the complex landscape of houselessness to achieve additional positive impacts by reaching out to the individuals who are regularly present in their spaces. These services are a valuable way to reach those who rely on parks and amenities for their daily survival and to offer support. The NRPA reports that there is an appetite among park and recreation professionals for guidance on how best to serve unhoused populations (Barrett, 2025). New guidance is appropriate because public parks and recreation are a publicly funded service, and it is a core responsibility for agencies to manage and deliver their spaces and amenities in an equitable

²⁴ These uses of parks were corroborated by the individuals experiencing chronic houselessness who were interviewed for this study.

manner for all communities.²⁵ Chapter 4 also discusses the responsibilities of publicly funded institutions to provide care.

This chapter focuses on public park management and recreation service delivery in the context of houselessness. It first provides information about the rise of houselessness in the United States, including information on the groups in society most at risk of losing their shelter. It explores the evidence regarding the management of public parks and the delivery of recreation services amid houselessness. Common responses to houselessness by park and recreation agencies are then highlighted, including the control and surveillance of unhoused individuals and the increasing use of hostile ordinances criminalizing those who rely on public spaces. The chapter concludes with an examination of public perceptions of the field's appropriate role in response to the growing number of individuals experiencing houselessness.

Houselessness

Houselessness is a significant global challenge. The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) estimates that 2.8 billion people worldwide are experiencing housing inadequacy, with over 300 million living without shelter (UN-Habitat, 2025). In the United States, houselessness is at its highest level ever, primarily driven by a shortage of affordable housing (Colburn & Aldern, 2022) and exacerbated by low wages and systemic inequity. As of

²⁵ In 2023, two thirds of public park and recreation agencies in the U.S. had implemented policies and activities to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (Recreation Management, 2023b).

2024, a total of 771,480 people resided in emergency shelters, safe havens, transitional housing programs, or unsheltered locations across the country.²⁶

Houselessness is not equally occurring across the U.S. population. A complex mix of intersecting individual vulnerabilities and attributes, such as race, increases the likelihood that an individual will lose their shelter (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Due to a long history of enduring systemic racism and the legacy of racist housing policies and redlining, a disproportionate number of the houseless population identifies as Black or African American, Native/Indigenous, and/or Hispanic/Latinx (Colburn & Aldern, 2022, p. 90). For instance, in 2024, individuals of color accounted for 69% of those experiencing houselessness (KCRHA, 2024b).²⁷

In the United States, people living below the poverty line, those with mental illness, or individuals struggling with addiction are also disproportionately represented among the unhoused (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Low-income renter households are especially at risk (HUD, 2022) and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) reports that nearly one-quarter of all individuals experiencing houselessness have a disability (NacchoVoice, 2019). While single individuals continue to be the largest group experiencing houselessness, approximately one third of unhoused individuals are part of a family with children aged under 18 (HUD, 2024b).²⁸

²⁶ Defined by HUD as “projects that provide private or semi-private temporary shelter and services to people experiencing severe mental illness and are limited to serving no more than 25 people within a facility” (HUD, 2024 p. ix).

²⁷ Black, African American, or African and American Indian, Alaska Native, and Indigenous populations (KCRHA, 2024b).

²⁸ 259,473 people in families, the largest number since data collection began, representing an increase by 39% between 2023 and 2024 (KCRHA, 2024b).

Sheltered status varies by racial groups. In 2024, Asian, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and multi-racial populations had the highest rates of unsheltered houselessness in the United States.

Unsheltered houselessness, as defined by HUD, means sleeping in places not designed for human habitation, for example cars, public parks, or bus or train stations. Nearly 70% of the overall unsheltered population are men or boys (HUD, 2024b).

The climate change crisis further impacts the number of individuals experiencing houselessness. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that the Americas region faces an unprecedented crisis due to climate-induced displacement (UNHCR, 2022).²⁹ In 2020, over 1.7 million people were internally displaced in the United States due to climate change (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2021).

More than half of the individuals experiencing houselessness in the United States are in the nation's 50 largest cities (HUD, 2024b).³⁰ Additionally, given current trends in urban growth, growing inequities, and housing supply shortages, the number of unhoused people in U.S. cities is predicted to continue rising (Flaming et al., 2021). The pressures on those living in urban areas are increasing, particularly in cities facing a chronic shortage of affordable housing. For example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reports that nationally, a \$100 median rent increase is associated with a 9% increase in the estimated houseless rate (U.S. GAO, 2020). A study analyzing evictions in Seattle in 2017 found that most evicted respondents became houseless because of their eviction, with 37.5% of respondents becoming completely unsheltered (Seattle Women's Commission, 2018).

²⁹ North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean.

³⁰ Although U.S. houselessness is concentrated in urban areas, it is increasingly becoming a significant issue in rural areas (Housing Assistance Council, 2025).

Changes in policy by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) raise uncertainties regarding future resources for tackling houselessness. The current administration is committed to ending funding for Housing First programs, which prioritize placing individuals into permanent housing ahead of addressing other support needs, such as mental health or addiction challenges (HUD, 2025). Additionally, federal funding for the Emergency Housing Voucher Program which provides assistance to those at risk of houselessness ends in 2026, four years earlier than anticipated due to the high cost of rents (Williamson, 2025).

Public Parks and Recreation in the Context of Houselessness

There is a lack of empirical information regarding the relationship between public parks, recreation services, and houselessness. This information gap limits the ability of agencies to respond effectively. Currently, there is no official data on how many unhoused people regularly utilize parks and recreation amenities, nor is there a well-developed body of research examining public park and recreation agencies' responses to houselessness. The most valuable insight into responses comes from a survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in 2017, which revealed a mix of contradictory approaches, which are also discussed below (NRPA, 2017b). For example, over half of the public park and recreation agencies that responded reported they offer services to individuals experiencing houselessness, yet three quarters were also considering hostile design measures to discourage use of their spaces by unsheltered populations (NRPA, 2017b).

The most well-evidenced strategies by public park and recreation agencies in response to houselessness primarily involve efforts to restrict park usage or forcibly remove individuals from

these spaces. For example, agencies may close park spaces to prevent unhoused individuals from using them or adopt enforcement-oriented approaches rooted in the regulation of park use or the implementation of park rules and codes (Beckett & Herbert, 2010; Neild & Rose, 2018; Rose, 2019; Speer & Goldfischer 2020; Pitas et al., 2025b). These strategies are discussed below.

Several studies examine the realities of managing public parks in areas with high levels of unsheltered houselessness. The research reveals park and land managers' feelings of conflict about the best approaches to take and a desire to be more proactive in their responses to houselessness (Derrien et al., 2023; Pitas et al., 2025a). Public perceptions of the appropriate role for agencies in relation to houselessness are nuanced, suggesting more research is necessary. These topics are explored further below. The following five sections explore the information gaps, public park and recreation agency responses to houselessness, the control and regulation of park use, the complexities of park management amid houselessness, and public perceptions of the role of agencies going forward.

Information Gaps

It is unclear how many individuals in the United States regularly depend on public parks for their shelter or how these spaces serve as residences for those experiencing houselessness (Rose, 2019; Koprowska et al., 2020; Derrien et al., 2023). There is also a shortage of information about the lived experiences of individuals residing in public spaces and their perspectives on the role of public park and recreation services in supporting them.

Official point-in-time counts of individuals experiencing houselessness record the numbers of people found sheltering in public parks, cars, abandoned buildings, transit stations,

and camping grounds (HUD, 2023). However, these statistics provide only an overall count number rather than a detailed breakdown by location.

Currently, there is no nationally defined role for public park and recreation agencies regarding houselessness. The responses of these agencies are at the discretion of each jurisdiction, resulting in a patchwork of activities (Colman & Barrett, 2022; Pitas et al., 2025b). Furthermore, there is a lack of literature exploring the equitable management of parks in relation to houselessness, leading to ambiguity and confusion around best practices (Pitas et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Agency Responses

In 2016, the NRPA issued a 25-question survey to its membership to better understand agencies' views and actions regarding their local houseless populations (NRPA, 2017b). Sixty-five park and recreation agencies participated in the survey, and over half reported they offer services aimed at individuals experiencing houselessness.³¹ Most respondents (91%) said they offer access to restrooms at least at one site, and around half provided shower facilities at least at one site. One-third of agencies reported providing shelter during inclement weather, 19% reported offering secure storage for personal effects, and 9% reported providing food assistance. One quarter stated they provide programming specific to their houseless population in partnership with city agencies and nonprofits (NRPA, 2017b). Examples of programming

³¹ There are around 10,000 U.S. public park and recreation agencies, this response rate is less than 1%. The exact figure of respondents that said they offer services is not provided.

included drop-in hours for social service support (the most common response), provision of career guidance or education and training opportunities (NRPA, 2017b, p. 8).³²

Nearly all agencies reported spending less than 10% of their annual operating budgets on services for the houseless, and most did not assign dedicated staff to work on issues of houselessness (NRPA, 2017b).³³ Forty-five percent of urban park and recreation agency directors reported they view the houseless population as a “nuisance” because they impede the other park users’ enjoyment of spaces (NRPA, 2017b, p. 3). Seventy-five percent of agencies reported they are currently using, or considering using, “hostile design” or other interventions to discourage individuals from staying overnight in their parks. Such strategies include park bench designs that prevent sleeping, fencing, and the installation of security cameras (NRPA, 2017b, p. 6).

These findings highlight a lack of strategic engagement within the public park and recreation field regarding houselessness, as well as a mismatch between implemented policies and the programs being offered. On one hand, agencies are offering some services to local houseless populations (albeit on a small budget relative to the whole). On the other hand, they are also considering hostile design elements to discourage individuals from using parks in the first place. Pitas et al. (2025a) reference Colburn and Aldern (2022), who describe almost all municipal responses to houselessness as crisis-driven, neglecting systemic or strategic approaches to address the root causes. They state that park and recreation agency actions may also be viewed in the same way (Pitas et al., 2025a). The contradictory mix of care-based support

³² 64% provide drop-in hours for city agencies and nonprofits, 36% career skills, 36% education/training 36%, health fitness programs and 21% arts/culture.

³³ Given that over half of the responding agencies said they are offering services to individuals experiencing houselessness, this level of spending feels low. However, more research is needed into agency spending related to houselessness.

and punitive actions taken by park and recreation agencies is also discussed in Chapter 6 (Seattle – Context), and the lack of long-term, strategic approaches is discussed in Chapter 11 (Discussion of the Seattle Interview Findings).

Control and Regulation of Park Use

The control of use, visitor behavior, and surveillance of spaces dates back to the first public parks. Regulation remains an integral element of contemporary public space management (Carmona, 2008).³⁴ Public park management and recreation service delivery continues to send powerful messages about who is considered to be a legitimate visitor, marginalizing certain groups and behaviors (Razack, 2007; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008). In particular, the behavior of individuals experiencing houselessness in public spaces is targeted and criminalized (Roy, 2003; Mitchell, 2011).

Today's public park and recreation management is significantly shaped by the "clean and safe" paradigm derived from broken windows theory. This theory associates poorly maintained or dirty spaces with disorder (Wilson & Kelling, 1982; Raap et al., 2022). The pursuit of "clean and safe" can lead to responses that displace individuals from public spaces, such as those experiencing houselessness, by equating their presence with a reduction in the quality and cleanliness of public spaces and a lack of safety (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006).

Cresswell (1996) examines how socially constructed, normative definitions of place lead to practices of social exclusion. When an activity is deemed "out of place," – such as sleeping – it can justify intervention by those managing the public space (Cresswell, 1996). In the early 1990s, some U.S. cities introduced expanded legal tools such as Park Exclusion Orders,

³⁴ Appendix A provides more information on the components of public space management.

empowering park employees to ban specific individuals from spaces as new practices of discipline and control (Beckett & Herbert, 2010). These orders are used alongside anti-sitting, lying down, sleeping, and camping ordinances which criminalize the basic functions of those reliant on public spaces for their daily lives, punishing individuals for undertaking essential acts in public (Mitchell, 2003; Dooling, 2009).

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty tracked the use of these ordinances in 187 cities. In 2019, 51% of these cities had at least one law restricting sleeping in public, and 55% had one or more laws prohibiting sitting and/or lying down. Seventy-two percent had at least one law banning camping in public (Law Center, 2019).

Over the past twenty years, such ordinances have expanded significantly across the United States. The Law Center's analysis found a 50% increase in city laws prohibiting sleeping in public since 2006, and a 103% increase in city laws prohibiting loitering, loafing, and/or vagrancy (Law Center, 2019).³⁵ The use of hostile architecture, which seeks to discourage individuals from spending extended time in public spaces, has also risen, alongside other measures such as cutting down trees in parks to prevent people from sleeping in their shade (Ensign, 2024).

Another significant common response by public authorities to camping in parks and other public spaces is the forced involuntary displacement of individuals (Rose, 2019). These actions are referred to by various terms such as “sweeps,” “clean ups,” “encampment removals,”

³⁵ In 2024, in a significant step backwards for the rights of individuals experiencing homelessness, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Johnson v. City of Grants Pass* that local governments do not violate the Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment if they enforce anti-camping and sleeping ordinances.

“encampment resolutions,” “abatement,” or “obstruction removals” and their use has also increased in many areas in recent years.

The American Public Health Association condemns these sweeps as a temporary cosmetic fix that endangers health and hinders assistance to vulnerable and marginalized communities (APHA, 2023). Sweeps are also linked to increasing mortality rates among those forcibly removed (Barocas et al., 2023). The displacement of individuals who rely on public spaces for shelter severely degrades their quality of life. It obstructs their efforts to connect with support services, housing, find employment, and utilize other essential amenities. Sweeps make it harder to maintain stable communications with case managers and outreach services (Sutton et al., 2026).

Sweeps are not only ineffective but also futile and unjust, moving people who have nowhere else to go and treating them as blight, a problem that needs to be cleaned up or kept out of sight (Bonds & Martin, 2016). This is a problematic process of othering in which certain groups are socially constructed and stigmatized as troublesome or inferior, thereby reducing the quality of public space (Mitchell, 2003; Roy, 2003; Beckett & Herbert, 2010).

Speer and Goldfischer (2020), in their examination of the value of urban parks for houseless individuals, conclude that traditional park management is increasingly combined with anti-houseless policing, leading to new hybrid forms of governance (p. 31). The increase in punitive approaches negatively impacts the use value of spaces for marginalized individuals who are increasingly criminalized for attempting to meet their basic survival needs in public spaces (Speer & Goldfischer, 2020).

Research by Beckett and Herbert (2010) regarding the City of Seattle, WA, found that Park Exclusion orders are disproportionately used against individuals experiencing houselessness (also discussed in Chapter 6) and people of color. They describe this targeting as a return to banishment in which “Increasing swaths of urban space are delimited as zones of exclusions from which the undesirables are banned” (Beckett & Herbert, 2010, p. 8). Additionally, an analysis of unsheltered houselessness in Utah’s parks concluded that merely being visibly houseless in some public spaces results in police engagement and harassment (Rose, 2019).

In some U.S. cities, the harassment and marginalization of unsheltered individuals using public spaces are intensifying, alongside other punitive measures, like involuntary mental health treatment aimed at removing people from public spaces. For example, officials in Utah are planning to open a large center in 2027 to detain up to 1,300 individuals experiencing houselessness to undergo mandatory addiction and mental health treatment (Barry & DeParle, 2025).

Park Management Amid Houselessness

Some research has examined the experiences of park managers working in areas affected by unsheltered houselessness. Neild and Rose (2018) conducted a study focused on the Jordan River Parkway in Salt Lake City, UT, to explore the role of parks managers in trying to mitigate social conflicts between housed park users and unsheltered individuals residing in the parkway. They found that the complexity of managing the park was compounded by managing the environmental, safety, and health concerns arising from a diverse range of people using the space. Housed users pressured the park department to remove infrastructure, such as benches, or to close facilities being used by individuals experiencing houselessness. Park staff reported spending up to half of their maintenance time addressing the social and environmental impacts of

those seeking shelter in the parkway, while also feeling this was beyond the scope of their professional training or outside of their duties (Neild & Rose, 2018).

In a study by Derrien et al. (2023) that examined institutional perspectives on unsheltered houselessness in public natural areas, land management interviewees expressed concerns about their lack of training and expertise, and an absence of guidance or policy. One major stressor for these interviewees was the imperative to deal with the impacts of houselessness on their spaces, for instance the costly disposal of trash and human waste or the mitigation of infrastructural or ecological damage, all while lacking adequate resources. Derrien et al. note that these interviewees were not partnering with social service providers to help fill skills and knowledge gaps or to seek support for the unsheltered individuals on their land (2023).

Derrien et al. state that the effects of this “unfunded mandate” concerning houselessness results in a deficit of staff time and resources needed to address other important issues. Some land managers described a “crisis of mission,” debating whether to prioritize ecological or social issues (Derrien et al., 2023). Feelings of conflict regarding the right thing to do regarding unsheltered populations were also reported by park district staff in another recent study. Park district employees viewed their involvement as related to enforcement and maintenance but expressed a desire to be more proactive in their responses to houselessness (Pitas et al., 2025a). The lack of training and skills, along with feelings of operating out of scope and without adequate guidance, support or resources, are significant themes in this study, and further explored in Sections II and III.

Perspectives on Park Agencies' Role

Finally, recent academic research has examined public attitudes toward park and recreation agencies taking action to support individuals experiencing houselessness (Pitas et al., 2023, 2025a, 2025b; Mullenbach et al., 2024). These findings are nuanced and sometimes contradictory. Pitas et al. (2023) surveyed 952 U.S. adults about their attitudes toward public park and recreation agencies assisting people experiencing houselessness. They concluded that respondents broadly support park and recreation agencies taking action to assist individuals using their spaces for shelter. Service-related actions were most favored. Specifically, providing temporary shelter during emergencies, allowing access to hygiene facilities, and conducting outreach to connect individuals with services. The least favored action was allowing people experiencing houselessness to live indefinitely in parks (Pitas et al., 2023).

This finding contrasts with a study by Tsai et al. (2019), which used an online survey of 541 U.S. adults to explore beliefs about houselessness. Here, 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that those experiencing houselessness “have the right to sleep overnight in public places like parks or bus or train stations.” Furthermore, 49% agreed that houseless people should be allowed to set up tents or other temporary shelters in public parks. However, conversely, 38% of respondents also believed that “the presence of homeless people spoils parks for families and children.”

A study by Mullenbach et al. (2024) further explored attitudes among 952 U.S. adults toward park agency involvement in addressing houselessness and concludes that the public views park and recreation agencies as appropriate local entities to respond to the issue.³⁶ Subsequent

³⁶ Additional analysis of the dataset used by Pitas et al., 2023.

research by Pitas et al. (2025a) has explored perspectives of three stakeholder groups: people experiencing houselessness, housed members of the public, and park district employees.³⁷ They found that both people experiencing houselessness and housed members favor limited roles for park agencies, such as reporting issues to service providers. Both groups favored the status quo over a more expansive role for agencies, believing, instead, that the core mission of these agencies is to provide safe, aesthetically pleasing environments and recreational opportunities (Pitas et al., 2025a).

Overall, public attitudes seem positive toward public park and recreation agencies taking an active role in providing support to individuals experiencing houselessness; however, further research would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of different groups. Chapter 16 also discusses where further research is needed.

Summary

Houselessness is a pressing issue for the field of public parks and recreation. As long as there are unhoused people, individuals experiencing houselessness will continue to use parks and recreation amenities to help meet their basic needs. The houselessness crisis has promoted a range of policy responses at a local level. Some agencies offer services for individuals experiencing houselessness, including access to hygiene facilities, emergency shelter, drop-in hours to meet with social service organizations, and secure storage for personal items (NRPA, 2017b). Others are involved in responses that forcibly remove people from public spaces.

Since the establishment of the first public parks, the managers of these spaces have sought to define acceptable behaviors while excluding or surveilling specific social groups.

³⁷ Mullenbach is also an author in the Pitas et al., studies (2023, 2025a&b).

Across the United States, the regulation of certain social groups is increasing. Many parks are enacting hostile ordinances criminalizing the basic survival needs of individuals who rely on public spaces. Recurring strategies by public park and recreation agencies in response to houselessness attempt to restrict or deter park use. These approaches are contrary to utilizing park and recreation assets as supportive solutions, instead focusing on preventing amenities from being damaged or overwhelmed by issues related to houselessness.

Park and recreation agencies have the power to better direct their time and resources and leverage their connections to benefit the daily lives of marginalized populations, such as those experiencing houselessness. This supportive role aligns with their responsibilities as publicly funded institutions. However, a major challenge is the extensive information gap regarding parks, recreation, and houselessness. The ability to take meaningful action is constrained by a lack of evidence on best practices. Research indicates that some park professionals feel out of their depth and lack the resources needed to help effectively, but the public in the United States appears to support a proactive role for agencies moving forward.

The following chapter explores an ethic of care, the theoretical and philosophical framework for this study, examining its potential to guide public park and recreation agencies towards more caring and compassionate policies and service delivery. It also discusses the importance of place-based care in creating more socially just cities.

Chapter Four: An Ethic of Care in the Context of Public Parks and Recreation

Introduction

The feminist ethic of care provides the foundation of this study's theoretical framework, informing its consideration of the roles and responsibilities of publicly funded park and recreation agencies in the context of houselessness. An ethic of care provides a valuable approach for policies and responses to houselessness in public parks and recreation amenities. It offers a powerful alternative to the framework of individual rights by focusing on our collective identity as a society. The perspective of care is important for re-envisioning what public institutions offer and deliver, to enrich and adapt policies and highlight injustices (Hankivsky, 2004; Lawson, 2007).

An ethic of care holds significant transformative potential for towns and cities but receives little coverage in the urban studies literature (Williams, 2017; Power & Williams, 2020; Gabauer et al., 2021). This chapter explores an ethic of care, primarily drawing on the work of Joan Tronto, an American feminist political scientist. It discusses why care ethics are of value in the context of the complex issue of houselessness and how the values of an ethic of care can help create a "good society" and underpin or complement justice-oriented approaches (Tronto, 1993).

In recent years, academic attention, especially within urban geography, has focused on the spatial context of care. This chapter examines the concepts of "spaces of care" (Conradson, 2003a) and "a place-based ethic of care" (Till, 2012), which are important for thinking about the provision of care in public park spaces and recreation amenities. The chapter concludes by presenting this study's conceptualization of place-based care – care practices that are situated

within and actively enacted through the public spaces frequented by individuals experiencing homelessness. As well as park-based care, more specifically, the care practices situated within and enacted through public parks.

An Ethic of Care

Care is integral to human life, yet it is devalued or missing from social analysis (Tronto, 1993). In recent years, an ethic of care has gained attention in urban debates, but there is still limited scholarship recognizing its potential value in making our cities more just or in enhancing justice-based theories (Williams 2017; Power & Williams, 2020; Gabauer et al., 2021). Most urban care research focuses on individualized, gendered, interpersonal caring within households or professional environments³⁸ rather than collective care (Power & Williams, 2020; Gabauer et al., 2021).

Despite this lack of coverage, there is an extensive literature concerning an ethic of care. Carol Gilligan (1982), a clinical psychologist and theorist, first made the case for an ethic of care by arguing for the reconstruction of moral understanding based on our responsibility to others rather than on the primacy of individual rights (Gilligan 1982, p. 21). The widely quoted definition of care by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher (1990) defines care as a species-typical activity that is part of the fabric of everyday life. They argue that care is integral to ensuring we live as well as possible:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40).

³⁸ Such as private care facilities.

Care involves the values of empathy, compassion, responsiveness, attentiveness, and responsibility (Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Lawson, 2007). While care is a value and an ethical disposition, it is also a practice that involves labor. Although definitions are ambiguous or imprecise, most theorists agree that care is an activity (Held, 2008). An ethic of care understands that we are interconnected as humans and defines actions according to the needs of others (Tronto, 1993).

To improve the chances of care being positive, Tronto and Fisher (1993) outline four moral elements of care: attentiveness to the needs of others, responsibility, competence (essential for delivering good care), and responsiveness from the care recipient. Care thus encompasses more than just good intentions or benevolence; it requires skills, expertise, and judgment (Tronto, 1993, p. 136; Cohen & Knierbein, 2021). It entails real labor, and can be challenging work (also discussed below and in the concluding chapters of this dissertation, Chapters 15 and 16)

Care can be conceived in various ways and may not always involve physical tasks. For example, Conradson (2003a) defines care “as the proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another and as the articulation of that interest (or affective stance) in practical ways” (p. 508). In this sense, care can manifest in everyday encounters between people, for instance, by one individual providing practical assistance to another (Conradson, 2003a).

An ethic of care has been applied in the context of domestic labor, private care, cleaning work, healthcare, social policy, households, community welfare services, and other public and institutional spaces that facilitate caring interactions (Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Conradson, 2003a; Hankivsky, 2004; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Williams, 2017; Power & Williams, 2020). These

aspects of care are relevant to this study because embracing a care ethic in the management of public parks and recreation entails a common level of hard work and shares similar challenges. Some studies investigate care in services for individuals experiencing houselessness (Johnsen et al., 2005; Williams, 2017). The literature review for this study did not identify research on care related to public parks or recreation services and houselessness.

Care and Competing Needs

An ethic of care is well-placed to allow us to think through the reality of competing needs in urban environments. Its strength lies in its relational social ontology, which offers an alternative perspective to the dominant perspective of universal, individual rights by emphasizing our interconnectedness as human beings. While the concept of care does not abandon the notion that humans are equal, it recognizes that we all require or receive care at various points in our lives and aims to highlight existing inequities (Tronto, 1993).³⁹

Lyles et al. (2018) contrast justice-based and care-based approaches, stating: “justice tends towards the impersonal, rational, individualistic, and reactive, while care, as well as compassion, tends toward the interpersonal, emotional, relational, and proactive” (p. 251). Urban parks are finite resources to which all individuals have equal rights. A common dilemma in public park management and recreation service delivery is how to fairly balance and reconcile competing needs or demands for the same space. It is often impossible to center everyone’s needs or claims to public spaces. For example, does a houseless individual seeking a place to rest or shelter have a stronger claim to use a space than a parent with young children who wishes to

³⁹ Care and justice are often presented as competing or as a binary, a section below discusses this further.

use the same space for play? In such cases, it can be very challenging to determine whose rights to prioritize.⁴⁰

Responses that seek to equalize competing interests can be problematic because they overlook the fact that we are not all situated equally or wield equal power (Hankivsky, 2004; Cohen & Knierbein, 2021). These approaches do not provide guidance on resolving tensions over shared spaces or a way to explain why certain individuals or groups, such as those experiencing houselessness, might need more assistance or support at a given time. Tronto argues that a morality grounded in care offers a broader perspective that helps us move away from a “privileged irresponsibility” wherein “those who are relatively privileged are granted by that privilege the opportunity simply to ignore certain forms of hardships that they do not face” (Tronto, 1993, pp. 120-121). This approach allows for greater sympathy towards the needs of other groups in society.

While an ethic of care provides a new framework for navigating equal claims to space, it is not a panacea. It is not a structural solution, and it does not produce perfect responses to the complex challenges stemming from inequity. These complexities are further explored below. Nevertheless, an ethic of care encourages a new perspective by asking questions about our responsibility to others and challenging the status quo to reveal what is possible through changes in ethical practice. Susan Fainstein, in her book *The Just City*, cites Nancy Fraser in referring to “non-reformist reforms.” These are reforms that operate within existing structures of capitalism to improve the lives of individuals and set in motion a positive trajectory of change, enabling

⁴⁰ For example, does the local resident have a stronger claim because they are housed and pay taxes? Or does the houseless individual have a stronger claim because they have nowhere else to go?

more radical reform over time (Fainstein, 2010, p. 18). In these ways, an ethic of care has the potential to be transformative. For example, by grounding public park and recreation management in a consideration of care, it is possible to challenge the marginalization of society's most vulnerable populations. This approach can positively impact their lives and potentially help lift individuals out of houselessness in the long term. The value of place-based care is further discussed in Chapters 15 and 16.

Care Is Not Always Positive

Care is not inherently positive (Tronto, 1993). Tronto notes that assessing care needs is complex, and these needs may change and evolve over time (Tronto, 1993). Care can sometimes involve problematic assumptions of vulnerability that presuppose care is needed due to individual failure (Gabauer et al., 2021). Furthermore, without a critical framing, care practices do not automatically recognize diversity or underlying structural injustices (Jacobs & Wiens, 2024).

The provision of care can be burdensome, messy, and complex. It can involve conflict, power imbalances, and there is the risk of dependency for those receiving care (Tronto 1993, 2010; Williams, 2020; Madanipour, 2021). There can also be multiple – and at times contradictory – interpretations of care and assessments of needs, with diametrically opposed views claiming to care. Different notions of care can contradict one another, and what is seen as care for one group might not be care for another. For example, one could argue that the removal of encampments from public spaces, as discussed in Chapter 3, is an act of care by protecting the environment (such as safeguarding plants and natural landscapes from trash or human waste) or caring for the larger community by restoring “full” use for the area's housed residents. By this logic, actions such as locking park gates or closing its amenities like restrooms could also be

framed as acts of care if those spaces are being misused. Care for the non-human world and landscape stewardship are briefly considered in Appendix B.

Puig de La Bellacasa (2017) states that the concept of care is often appropriated normatively in contemporary society, noting that calls to care are everywhere, for instance, in the marketing of products and goods. The notion of care can be used in various ways depending on the user's agenda, leading to different interpretations in policy and practice. For instance, in a 2022 announcement, New York City Mayor Eric Adams described a directive to involuntarily detain individuals deemed mentally ill as a measure that is "leading with compassion and care" (Office of the Mayor, 2022). Madanipour categorizes this appropriation of the language of care as "care washing," in which the true reality of the activities is obscured (Madanipour, 2021).

Similar critiques have been made of related concepts such as compassion and empathy (Murphy, 2009; Brown et al., 2019). Brown et al. (2019) discuss empathy in relation to environmental sustainability, describing it as a "slippery term" due to its varied meanings across disciplines and the fact that it does not automatically lead to pro-environmental actions (p. 12). Murphy examines "compassionate" strategies for managing homelessness in San Francisco, noting that punitive and exclusionary practices can be concealed by the language of compassion (Murphy, 2009 p. 305).

Paperson (2014) warns that approaches rooted in feminist, antiracist, or environmental justice perspectives should not be assumed to be inherently positive (p. 121). For example, an ethic of care has been criticized as being Eurocentric, particularly situated in a Global North, white, middle-class perspective. It has faced criticism for centering the experiences of more privileged women and for being biased towards Western feminist ideals (Gary, 2022). However, an ethic of care remains a powerful political ideal. It is not inherently Western or biased towards

those in privileged positions. When deliberately applied to support and improve the lives of marginalized populations, an ethic of care offers a valuable vision of places that care well (Tronto, 1993; Power & Williams, 2020). It has significant potential to inform thinking on the role that publicly funded institutions can play in the context of houselessness.

Care and Public Institutions

Early care ethicists particularly focused on the role of women as caregivers within the domestic sphere. Tronto expands this focus by highlighting the broader political context and emphasizing the responsibility of publicly funded institutions to provide care. This perspective challenges the dominant neoliberal paradigm (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Tronto, 2010, 2015). It is important because care considerations are generally not central to public policy (Phillips, 2007).⁴¹

Tronto explores how care can be routinized in institutions, highlighting the need for formal, explicit practices that evaluate how well organizations meet their caring obligations. She states that it is key to deliberately outline the components of care, involving a diverse range of people, including those receiving care (Tronto, 1990). Her work brings a greater visibility regarding instances where public institutions fail to care. The invisibility of certain social groups in public policy results from intentional decisions made by those in power, and so too is withholding care from particular individuals (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, Kaufman-Osborn et al., 2018).

⁴¹ Although in Europe, in some areas of social policy such as health, employment and education, it is increasingly an area of debate (Phillips, 2007).

The ethic of care aligns with public service values and fits within the wider context of municipal policy and action. Contemporary publicly funded institutions, such as park and recreation agencies, face complex, “wicked” problems, including that which is the focus of this study – rising rates of houselessness. These institutions can evolve from traditional, linear ways of working and adapt by creating new responsive practices and norms centered on values of care (Innes & Booher, 2010). For example, Sevenhuijsen (2003), in exploring the relevance of an ethic of care for Dutch social policy, describes it as a necessary broadening of issues covered by policy. It goes beyond merely institutionalizing compassion to create a more flexible and responsive public administration.⁴²

In examining the applicability of an ethic of care to Canadian social policy, Hankivsky (2004) states that basing political institutions on impartial decision-making rooted in universal equal rights has led to limited policies that overlook a critical reality: “We are not, however, all the same. We are not equally situated or equally empowered” (p. 6). Care ethics reframes the discourse on social responsibility, challenging political policies that marginalize care, and supporting movements toward practices that enhance well-being. Implemented thoughtfully, an ethic of care could foster the development of new institutional forms and integrate social responsibility into professional practices (Lawson, 2007).

Care and Public Park Agencies

Public park and recreation agencies cannot address the root causes of structural inequities; however, there is real potential for these agencies to direct their resources towards alleviating their impacts. Mallach (2018) emphasizes that local public institutions, such as public

⁴² Dutch policymakers have recognized the applicability of care ethics to their policies on equal opportunities in the labor market and on the provision of professional support for the elderly.

park and recreation agencies, play a crucial role in determining “whether people are included or excluded, and whether opportunity becomes a reality for those who have been left behind” (p. 12). While the federal government can assist in multiple ways, it is local policies and strategies that ultimately shape and drive cities.

Park and recreation agencies possess the autonomy and capability to change their organizations. It is within their scope as publicly funded agencies to rethink their policies and practices going forward to intentionally prioritize care and compassion in the services they offer and the spaces they manage. However, it is uncertain whether the public park and recreation field has the appetite to broaden its focus. Stormann (1991) examined the ideology within American urban parks and recreation and concluded that leisure study programs tend to be conceived too narrowly. Stormann criticizes these programs for their “myopic and sterile perspectives,” which omit the vital role of park and recreation professionals in society and their potential power and influence over those using their spaces and amenities (1991, p. 149).

The provision of care is not at odds with how agencies have worked in the past, nor is it in conflict with their contemporary functions. Integrating care practices within public park and recreation services has precedent. Social workers were among the first professionals employed by parks departments, serving in this capacity from around 1900 to 1930 (Cranz, 1982). Parks serve as essential resources for cities during times of crisis. For instance, after the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fires, Golden Gate Park and other green spaces in San Francisco provided shelter for refugees (Woods, n.d.; Cranz, 1982; Berney, 2019). During World War II, 40% of the vegetables consumed in North America were grown on public land, including park spaces, as part of the Victory Gardens Initiative (Zeunert, 2016).

Public park and recreation agencies continue to play a frontline role during emergency events, rapidly adapting to provide care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parks were critical sites for social support, providing food assistance, childcare spaces, distribution of personal protective equipment, and eventually, testing and vaccinations (NRPA, n.d. -b). In some areas, such as Minneapolis, parks were designated as suitable locations for encampments to provide shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness. This decision reflected an understanding that, in times of emergency, park assets could be leveraged for shelter and survival (MPRB, 2020).

Care and Justice

The public potential of a care ethic is undertheorized compared to a justice ethic and is frequently presented as being in tension with rights-based thinking (Hankivsky, 2004; Williams 2017). Theories such as redistributive rights-based arguments, for instance, the “right to the city” (as theorized by Lefebvre, Harvey, Mitchell, and others), Edward Soja’s work on spatial justice, and Fainstein’s normative exploration of the just city, are very influential in urban theory. These theories are recognized for their compelling challenges to neoliberalism (Williams, 2017, 2020).

Positioning an ethic of care as competing with justice theories is unhelpful and is not especially in line with the earlier care ethicists’ thinking (Williams, 2017). While Carol Gilligan (1982) argued for an ethic of care by challenging the primacy of individual rights, she also recognized that responsibilities and rights, while distinct, are connected (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174). Tronto noted that the relationship between justice and care could be one of compatibility. She states:

This emerging moral order does not require that we abandon previous moral commitments, for example, to universalizability, or to a moral point of view that rejects

special pleading to serve one's interests. What it also requires, though, is that we recognize that humans are not only autonomous and equal, but that they are also beings who require care (Tronto, 1993, pp. 151-152).

The issue of houselessness is one of social and environmental injustice (Dooling, 2009; Bonds & Martin, 2016; Rose, 2019; Koprowska, 2020), and an ethic of care offers new ways of seeing those experiencing houselessness and understanding their needs. For instance, Hankivsky notes that an ethic of care, through its focus on difference and disadvantage, enriches our understanding of social justice:

Uninformed by a care ethic, the conception of social justice will remain lacking – akin to an outline of a painting that has yet to be filled in. Care adds color, dimension, texture, and perspective to the canvas. It also reveals aspects of our public lives that have not been properly understood (Hankivsky, 2004, p. 31).

Recent care ethicists argue that the boundaries between responsibilities, as expressed by an ethic of care, and individual rights are blurred. The work of Miriam J. Williams, particularly her concept of “care-full justice,” is important (Williams, 2017, 2020). She argues that care and justice provide a foundation for one another, stating “care is also at work alongside justice on the ground in healing and repairing our world” (Williams, 2017, p. 825).

Using the case study of Our Place, a drop-in center that offers services to low-income and unhoused individuals in Sydney, Australia, Williams provides examples of ordinary, everyday practices that exemplify both care and justice. She notes that acts of care – such as the provision of food, toiletries, and blankets – are inherently redistributive by nature and respond to injustices. Care practices are frequently not grand; they are “instead mundane and ordinary implicit activism that care for and respond to injustices” (Williams, 2017, p. 831).

Neither care nor justice is without flaws. Purcell (2002) notes that, despite the intentions of theorists such as Lefebvre, the right to the city is not inherently liberating. It has the potential to empower citizens, but their decisions may not be inclusive (Purcell, 2002). Similarly, Fainstein, in her call for justice to serve as the evaluative criterion for policymaking, acknowledges the complexity of maximizing the values of equity, democracy, and diversity, as these concepts can have multiple meanings and conflicting agendas (Fainstein, 2010). Care can be unjust, and justice can be un-caring. As noted earlier, practices of care can focus on one group or community to the exclusion of others. Something may be just or fair, but without care, it may fail to recognize that an individual or a group needs additional assistance or support.

Therefore, care alone does not lead to more equitable living conditions in cities; its potential is enhanced when combined with spatial practices of material and symbolic redistribution (Gabauer et al., 2021). The transformative potential of an ethic of care is realized through its coupling with an ethic of justice (Williams, 2017, p. 830).

A Broader Notion of Care

An ethic of care is not the only approach that recognizes the importance of mutual responsibility in challenging injustice or inequity. The literature review for this study also explored Indigenous approaches and ecofeminism to understand their values. While this review was not extensive, it intended to understand how these perspectives might intersect with an ethic of care.

There are key commonalities between the Indigenous worldviews and an ethic of care, both of which emphasize interdependence (Williams, 2020). For centuries, care has been central to Indigenous perspectives, particularly regarding the stewardship of land and the ancient

understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. Indigenous perspectives also possess the transformative potential to challenge oppressive practices (Nejad et al., 2020). They are another rich body of discourse that questions the applicability of a language of universal rights (Paperson, 2014; Tuck & McCoy, 2014). Indigenous approaches provide a broader perspective of care, grounded in relational, nuanced, and respectful ways of knowing (Kovach, 2015).

Ecofeminism, as a different strand of feminist theory, is also centered on values of care and contextual, relational reciprocity (Curtin, 1991). This approach posits that women care for and assume responsibility for the environment (MacGregor, 2006). It highlights the parallels between the domination of nature and the domination of women, with care for the environment – through preservation and repair – a way to combat this domination (MacGregor, 2006, p. 59).

The relationship between ecofeminism and an ethic of care is complex. The two theories do not necessarily communicate with or agree with each other (Curtin, 1991, p. 71). Some ecofeminists caution that an ethic of care, as theorized by Gilligan, risks romanticizing women's connection to caring practices (MacGregor, 2006, pp. 27-28). Tronto's perspective is valuable for addressing this romanticization by highlighting that care is also political and emphasizing the role of political institutions in providing care, the focus of this study.

The Spatiality of Care: Spaces of Care and Place-Based Care

This dissertation focuses on care practices employed in and through public parks and recreation amenities to engage with hard-to-reach, marginalized communities. As discussed in Chapter 2, public spaces are neither neutral nor static; they are continuously influenced by multiple factors. Spaces are socially produced, shaped by human interactions (Lefebvre, 1996). The significance of place in relation to the practice of care is often invisible in the care literature.

Instead, this literature has frequently focused on the providers of care rather than the importance of place in developing or supporting the provision of care (Phillips, 2007).

In recent years, however, urban or human geographers have expanded conceptualizations of care to include its complex spatial context, including the spatial relations produced by and through care (Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). For example, this research has examined the institutional and non-institutional settings that facilitate caring interactions, the work involved in caring for places, and the importance of proximity and distance in care (Conradson, 2003a&b; Johnsen et al., 2005; Lawson, 2007; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Till, 2012; Power & Williams, 2020).⁴³

Two key concepts relevant to this dissertation are David Conradson's (2003) "spaces of care" and Karen E. Till's (2012) "place-based ethics of care," both of which are discussed below. These concepts inform this study's conceptualization of place-based care – care practices that are situated within and actively enacted through public spaces, and park-based care, the care practices within and enacted through public parks.

Spaces of Care

Conradson's (2003) paper "Spaces of Care in the City" is significant for its examination of how different spatial settings influence human subjectivity, which he defines as "our sense of self, who we are and feel able to be" (p. 509). Building on earlier work by Gesler (1992), which explored the therapeutic benefits or healing powers associated with certain environments or places, Conradson uses an English urban community drop-in center as an example to explore how care is woven into this space. He highlights: "the effects of an embodied encounter with the

⁴³ This study is primarily oriented to human-centered care. Appendix B expands on care for the non-human world.

social and material relations that constitute a place” (p. 509). His concept of “spaces of care” describes how care is enacted in and through spaces and emphasizes the importance of relational practices that generate empathic warmth, feelings of support, and positive regard among individuals.

Johnsen et al. (2005) summarize the key characteristics of spaces of care. These settings serve as sites for resource distribution, and their effectiveness is influenced by the qualities of the site, for instance, the space’s design and available amenities. Spaces of care typically have an open-door policy, allowing anyone to enter without prior screening or questioning. Generally, all are welcome, although the experiences of populations being served by the specific setting might be centered, for instance those with a disability, or individuals experiencing houselessness. The open-door policy does however have limitations; individuals who display unacceptable behavior may be asked to leave. Determining what constitutes unacceptable behavior can be challenging and often relies on personal judgment. This is also discussed in Chapter 12 (Freeway Park, Seattle).

Most research on spaces of care has focused on spatially fixed, indoor locations (Johnsen et al., 2005). This study examines three case studies (Chapters 12-14) that center on park-based practices of care. These case studies illustrate the realities of implementing care in urban public parks and the ways these spaces facilitate outreach and support marginalized individuals.

A Place-Based Ethic of Care

Karen E. Till (2012) explores the potential of a “place-based ethic of care” to promote more socially-just cities. Her concept of “Wounded Cities” emphasizes the importance of spatial histories in relation to care. Focusing on cities affected by settlement clearances that have caused

trauma and displacement, Till describes both cities and their residents as being damaged by state actions, while also presenting them as environments of care. Her work aims to “Illustrate how attending to, caring for, and being cared for by place and those that inhabit the place are significant ethical and political practices that may work to constitute more democratic urban realms” (Till, 2012, p. 5). Till investigates the impact of a place’s past structural violence and injustices, considering how these embedded injustices affect caregiving and receiving. In her conceptualization of a place-based ethic of care, care extends beyond individuals attending to people within place; it also encompasses a responsibility to care for the wounded places themselves.

Till provides the first articulation of the value of a place-based ethic of care, and her research is important for its examination of injustice and marginalization. My study also employs the language of place-based care, but in a narrower sense compared to Till’s conceptualization. This dissertation recognizes the significant role of history in creating the need for care and in marginalizing specific groups in society, yet it does not explicitly explore these themes in its interviews or case studies. While it does not focus directly on care for places, research participants expressed their responsibilities as stewards of the landscape and noted how this responsibility can conflict with caring for individuals who use public parks for shelter (Chapter 9).

The concept of place-based care is valuable because it highlights the role of space as a venue or context for delivering active care practices. Place-based care is also instrumental in fostering care through situated, repeated, supportive interactions, which can gradually build trust and rapport with individuals who regularly use these spaces. Caring for people in urban parks

involves deliberate, active, and practical solutions that facilitate equitable access to these spaces and meet the needs of society's most vulnerable populations.

Such acts of care can take place in different spatial contexts. Place-based care is dynamic rather than static, as it focuses on the spaces individuals already use. These places may provide comfort or safety, or serve practical purposes, for instance, a place to sit or set down personal belongings. Shifting the emphasis from indoor environments, such as offices, to outreach or peripatetic care may increase the likelihood of engaging with society's most marginalized groups.

Engaging with people in the locations they already frequent can also help develop a more accurate understanding of their circumstances and needs. For example, Dooling (2009) observed after visiting an encampment, "I could feel acutely the vulnerability of camping illegally" (p. 634). She states that conducting outreach in these settings is "an incremental step toward understanding the physical and psychological experiences of being excluded and contained" (p. 634).

Place-based, and park-based, care is likely to be more effective in urban areas due to the closer proximity of support and outreach services. Derrien et al. (2023) examine institutional perspectives on unsheltered homelessness in public natural areas. Their interviewees note the challenges they face when engaging with unhoused groups in remote public nature spaces, for example, a lack of electricity to charge phones and difficulties in traveling to off-site social service facilities. Chapters 11, 15, and 16 further discuss place-based care.

Summary

Although structural injustices such as houselessness cannot be solved by public park and recreation agencies, they can control how they respond to the effects of these injustices as they manifest within park boundaries, as well as the values they model in their daily management. Joan Tronto's thinking provides a valuable vision of cities that prioritize care while highlighting inequities and the instances in which public institutions fail to care (Power & Williams, 2020). Public parks and recreation spaces are essential resources for the unhoused. The concept of place-based care is central to this dissertation's exploration of the potential benefits of park or recreation amenities as care environments, or spaces of care, for individuals experiencing houselessness.

Care ethics open the door to situated, targeted practices grounded in the lived realities of those who use public parks and recreation amenities, rather than relying on justice-based approaches that apply a universal, or "one size fits all" model (Lawson, 2007; Williams, 2017). An emphasis on care has the potential to disrupt the status quo, inspiring ethical imagination of other alternatives (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017). The next chapter outlines the study's methods and analytical process. It also details how research participants were treated with care, in alignment with the core values of this research.

Chapter Five: Study Methods, Analysis, and Limitations

Introduction

This study uses a qualitative methodology, drawing on interviews with 70 individuals across three cities: Atlanta, GA, Seattle, WA, and Washington, D.C. (Table 5.1) as well as site visits and observations conducted in Woodruff Park (Atlanta), Freeway Park (Seattle), and Franklin Park (Washington, D.C.). To analyze the research data, an inductive research approach and grounded theory were used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thomas, 2006).

The research is backed by an extensive literature review and a process of synthesizing knowledge in collaboration with the two lead interviewees in the Atlanta and Washington, D.C. case studies, which has been presented at four national park conferences or seminars.⁴⁴ To aid balance, a wide range of sources were drawn from, and the information gathered during interviews was triangulated with other published literature, site observations, and responses from other participants. It was not possible to speak with some teams within Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR). However, a diverse group of participants were recruited, and most of the individuals in Seattle, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. who were approached to participate were willing to engage in conversation.

⁴⁴ The lead interviewees are Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID, and Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC. The seminars and conferences are: Park Pride Annual Conference presentation “Public Space and Homelessness: Providing Place-Based Care,” March 25th 2024, recording available: <https://parkpride.org/2024-parks-greenspace-conference-intention-to-action/> Two City Park Alliance peer conversation presentations “Addressing Homelessness in Parks: Providing Place-Based Care,” September 9th and 17th 2024, <https://cityparksalliance.org/events/peer-conversations/past/> . The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) annual conference, education session presentation “The Invisible Ones: Providing Place-Based Care for the Unhoused in Green Spaces,” September 17th, 2025.

This chapter outlines the study’s methods and explains the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. It explores the treatment of research participants through an ethic of care and examines how my positionality influenced the research. The analysis process is summarized, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the study’s limitations.

Study Overview

The study comprises three core components:

1. **Literature review and archival research:** A comprehensive review focusing on the management of urban public parks and recreation amenities in relation to houselessness, the national context of rising houselessness and inequity, and the delivery of park and recreation services in the three case study areas.
2. **Interviews:** In-depth interviews conducted in Atlanta, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. from September 2023 to January 2025, involving park professionals and individuals experiencing houselessness (see Table 5.1).⁴⁵ This includes:
 - Forty-five interviews in Seattle with a total of 50 participants, including park professionals, social outreach workers, police officials, community safety officers, relevant nonprofit representatives, and individuals experiencing chronic houselessness.
 - Seven interviews in Atlanta with nine individuals working in houseless outreach, park programming, and one city council member.

⁴⁵ The majority of the interviews were conducted in-person (five were online).

- Ten interviews in Washington, D.C., involving 11 individuals, including professionals from the business improvement district and one individual experiencing chronic homelessness.
3. **Site observations:** Conducted in three city parks—Woodruff Park in Atlanta, Freeway Park in Seattle, and Franklin Park in Washington, D.C.—between October 2023 and January 2025. These observations included non-participatory reflections as a park visitor and participatory experiences as a volunteer in Freeway Park. Observations on the use of the physical environment in each park are also part of this study.

Study Methods

Given the complex context and social issues at play in this research, qualitative methods were the best choice because they are probing, situated, and interpretive (Neuman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to produce deep, descriptive analyses, allowing issues to be unpacked and explored in depth (Neuman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research approaches are particularly valuable for capturing the voices of marginalized communities, providing tools sensitive to power dynamics and allowing individuals to express themselves in their own terms (Manzo & de Carvalho, 2020). These approaches are especially appropriate for guiding this study, which includes the perspectives of individuals experiencing homelessness.

The study presents three case studies to gain insights into various approaches to park management that address homelessness. Described as the “unappreciated workhorse of contemporary social sciences” (Schrunk, 2006, p. 170), case studies can effectively navigate complexity and handle a diverse array of information sources. This method produces “thick

description,” offering depth rather than breadth of information (Geertz, 1970, p. 23). Case studies are particularly useful for policy research (Yin, 2003). They can facilitate change and address contentious subjects to illuminate multiple, contrasting viewpoints or ways of thinking (Mills, 2009). The rationale for the choice of the three case studies is provided in Chapter 12.

The study employs three methods: a literature review; semi-structured interviews; and site observations. Each method is discussed in detail below.

Literature Review and Archival Research

The literature review for this study aimed to build a picture of the national context regarding houselessness and the management and delivery of public parks and recreation amenities within that context. The results of this review are presented in Chapter 2. This review informed the development of the study’s research questions (outlined in Chapter 1) and identified key gaps in the existing knowledge base. It helped clarify emerging questions and themes from the fieldwork and supported the processes of interpretation and analysis. The literature search focused upon accessible English-language academic and web-based sources, including news media articles and practice literature. All sources were organized in Zotero.

Key search terms included “parks,” “recreation,” “care,” “homelessness,” “support,” “compassion,” “park management,” and “situated.” The topics included in the review were:

- Houselessness and inequity in North America.
- The history of North American public parks and their management, including the normative ideals that shape these spaces.
- The roles and responsibilities of contemporary public realm managers, including changes in these roles.

- Management of urban public parks and recreation amenities in relation to houselessness, including evidence of examples of responses and approaches.
- An Ethic of Care, including its application to public service delivery.

Archival research identified published public park and recreation policy and planning documents to support the literature review. This review sought examples of policies and current practices relevant to park and recreation organization responses to houselessness. It primarily found information on North American park agencies. Materials examined included publicly available information on park agency policies, position statements, internal documents, memos, committee minutes, and other relevant materials. These materials provided additional scaffolding for the research, informing its background and context, and aiding in the understanding and interpretation of each case area.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews capture individuals' observations and experiences, offering insights into a range of real-life perspectives, opinions and interpretations (Weiss, 1994). Seventy individuals were interviewed for this study using a semi-structured format that allowed flexibility for spontaneous responses and fostered a more natural conversation. The interviews used open-ended questions to deeply explore interviewees' responses and provide flexibility for further discussion on topics as needed.

Interviews with individuals working for SPR and the other institutions lasted around one hour, while those with individuals experiencing houselessness were approximately 20 minutes. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using software (Otter.ai). The interview instruments are provided in Appendix C, along with information on the different groups of

research participants in Appendix D. Table 5.1 presents the number of interviews by city and “type” of participant.

Table 5.1: Number of Interviews by City and Participant Type

	“Type” of participant	Interviewees	Interviews
Seattle	Park professional	24	24
	“Other” professional	16	12
	Individual experiencing houselessness	10	9
	Seattle subtotal	50	45
Atlanta	BID worker	5	3
	“Other” professional	2	2
	Park professional	1	1
	Councilmember	1	1
	Atlanta subtotal	9	7
D.C.	BID worker	8	7
	“Other” professional	2	2
	Individual experiencing houselessness	1	1
	D.C. subtotal	11	10
Total		70	62

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, where initial subjects were asked to recommend others who might be willing to speak (Neuman, 1994). A drawback of this method is that it can lead to a narrow set of individuals with similar perspectives. To mitigate this, a diverse group of interviewees was sought. Recruitment methods included utilizing contacts within the park agencies in the study areas and reaching out to individuals from different teams and organizations.

The interviewees brought their own positionality and interpretations to the conversations. Where possible, the information gathered during the conversations was verified by triangulating it with information from other interviews, as well as published literature and site observations (Mikecz, 2012). The topic of houselessness is contentious and can elicit strong emotions. Some interviewees became emotional when discussing their experiences. In these moments, I tried to respond empathetically and foster a caring and supportive atmosphere. We took breaks when needed, and I asked participants whether they felt comfortable continuing to talk before continuing. The section below further discusses how research participants were treated with care.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in two stages from September 2023 to January 2025. The first stage involved interviews with 38 professionals and ten individuals experiencing houselessness in the City of Seattle. The objectives of these conversations were to gather insights and build knowledge on managing parks and recreational amenities amid houselessness, to understand the experiences of individuals using these spaces for daily survival, and to explore how public parks could better serve their houseless populations and work differently going forward.

An interview question was added after one month of fieldwork (October 2023) to explore whether interviewees believe it is within the duties and responsibilities of park and recreation

agencies to respond to issues related to houselessness. This addition came after a phone conversation with a senior parks professional who argued that public park and recreation agencies do not have a role to play in addressing issues arising from houselessness, stating that it is not their “wheelhouse” and providing “social services” is outside their scope. The additional interview question captured interviewees’ responses to his perspective.

Chapters 6 to 11 present the results of the first stage interviews. The interview instruments (see Appendix C) were tailored to the interviewee’s professional background and daily role and responsibilities.

The second stage of the study focused on investigating distinct approaches to providing park-based care for individuals experiencing chronic houselessness in Atlanta, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. This stage included interviews with professionals and one person who is living houseless (see Table 5.1). Most of the case study interviewees agreed to be identified by name and job title, although a few participants (three Supportive Services Case Managers in Atlanta, one Park Ambassador in Washington, DC., and an officer in the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department) asked for their names not to be included.

The interview instruments used in the first stage of the fieldwork were adapted for each conversation. Participants were asked core questions from this interview instrument, including those looking at the values of care in park management and the future direction of park and recreation services, alongside additional questions related to their work and the specific local context. Chapters 12 to 14 present detailed information on the case studies.

Observations were recorded after each interview; these included the key points discussed, follow-up questions, and notes on interesting issues or additional information to pursue. These

notes were particularly valuable in tracking the themes emerging from conversations and identifying potential areas to further explore. Close attention was paid to the language used during interviews and to instances where individuals appeared conflicted. This was important because the issue of houselessness in parks is challenging. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 2, public parks are not neutral spaces (Cranz, 1982); people often have strong ideas about their “proper” use (Rosenfield, 1989; Gabriel, 2011). The analysis also focused on the meanings implied by participants and linguistic clues, such as facial expressions, which often convey meaning (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Site Observations

Data collection through direct observation, while visiting locations or engaging in face-to-face interactions, enriches our understanding of real life (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). This study draws on site-level observation data collected informally while visiting the three selected parks: Woodruff Park in Atlanta, Freeway Park in Seattle, and Franklin Park in Washington, D.C. Each park was visited in the morning, during lunchtime, and late in the afternoon to capture observations throughout the day.⁴⁶ The study is also supported by observations recorded while volunteering in seven two-hour, “Cozy Corner” program sessions at Freeway Park (with further details in Chapter 12). Field notes were taken at each location and later utilized to aid interpretation and deepen the study’s analysis.

⁴⁶ Visit observations took place in Woodruff Park from October 9th to 12th, 2023 and in Franklin Park from October 28th to 30th, 2024. These visits took place during the week. Visits to Freeway Park began on January 16th, 2024, and continued until January 14th, 2025. These visits are a combination of weekdays and weekends. I continue to visit Freeway Park frequently as I reside in the Seattle area.

Observations conducted during visits to the three parks were undertaken in a non-participant capacity, from the perspective of an everyday park visitor. Zeisel (1994) emphasizes the value of observing “physical traces” to provide important insights into how environments meet people’s needs, how spaces are used, and the decisions being made about those places (p. 89). In this study, the observations focused on documenting how the parks were utilized by different individuals, including their behaviors, activities, and interactions with other visitors, and noted any visible impacts related to houselessness, such as damage, tents, or makeshift shelters. Observations recorded the cleanliness of spaces, adaptations within the environment (such as visitors rearranging park furniture), the presence of park staff or other officials, and evidence of management and maintenance by the park organization.

The observations aimed to assess how each park was used by unhoused individuals. The presence of people experiencing houselessness spending time, resting, or sleeping in the parks was interpreted as an indication of their comfort level with these spaces. This inference is subjective; while it enriches the observations, it is important to recognize that unhoused individuals also occupy these spaces out of necessity, as they have nowhere else to go.

Photographs were taken in each park to help recall the context of the observations, document the parks’ usage, and highlight interesting or welcoming features. For instance, the large, comfortable benches in Franklin Park, Washington, D.C., and informational signage in Freeway Park were noted. Care was taken to respect individuals’ privacy and anonymity, ensuring that no photographs captured faces. In busy areas, photos were taken from a respectful distance, usually capturing individuals from behind.

In Freeway Park, the site visit observations were supplemented with additional reflections noted while volunteering for seven Cozy Corner program sessions in the park.⁴⁷ Participant observation “allows researchers to get ‘into’ a setting: to understand nuances that users of that setting feel” (Zeisel, 1984, p. 113). Zeisel categorizes this method as having an “empathetic quality” (p. 113).

Volunteering at Freeway Park provided richer insights into the operation and ethos of the Cozy Corner program and enabled easy access to program attendees. During this time, informal conversations with visitors regarding their thoughts on the program were often possible. Observations made during the volunteer sessions included the numbers and types of individuals attending, the services they used or requested, their interactions with program staff and each other, how long they stayed, and how the park served as a setting for care and support.

During one session, an individual who appeared to be unhoused became agitated in the park (further discussed in Chapter 12). Conversations with Freeway Park Association staff and other program attendees afterward provided valuable insights into the judgment calls and support that are required when managing difficult situations in the park. The incident illustrated the complexities and challenges of managing a park-based program frequented by diverse groups. These insights contribute to the discussion in Chapter 15 regarding the active public space stewardship in the three case studies. It includes the balancing acts involved in managing various different behaviors and decisions regarding when additional intervention may be necessary.

Together, these site observations enhance the data collected through interviews, forming a more comprehensive picture and contributing to a better understanding of the realities of

⁴⁷ Between January 2024 and January 2025.

managing and delivering park-based care in the three areas. They grounded the study's interpretation of work in each location, assisting in the development of three case studies (detailed in Chapters 12 - 14).

Co-Creation of Knowledge Through Collaboration

In addition to the formal methods used in this study, ongoing discussions and collaboration with the lead interviewees in the Atlanta and Washington, D.C. case studies (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID, and Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC) played a key role in generating valuable new insights. Four national public park and recreation conference or seminar presentations provided important opportunities for co-creating original content on place-based care, rehearsing the communication of the study's findings, and further synthesizing arguments and conclusions.⁴⁸ Approximately 280 people attended the four presentations. Details are available in Appendix E.

The benefits of collaboration include the transfer and sharing of knowledge, including tacit knowledge, which fosters cross-fertilization of ideas and generates new perspectives (Katz & Martin, 1997). Collaborating with Nakasha and Cecily to write and compile presentations for the four events significantly deepened my understanding of their work. Working with them provided the opportunity to verify interpretations, gather additional information on their work based on what they deemed important, and further develop the findings of this study.

The events were essential opportunities to maintain communication and spend time with Nakasha and Cecily, facilitating a continuous exchange of information about the study's progress

⁴⁸ The events comprised a presentation at the Park Pride annual conference in March 2024, two City Park Alliance "peer conversation" seminars in September 2024, and an "education session" for the National Park and Recreation Association annual conference in September 2025.

and providing intellectual companionship. This collaboration was especially beneficial given the study's complexity and the scarcity of other projects that use park environments as spaces of care.

During each presentation, Nakasha and Cecily elaborated on how place-based care applies to their work. The events also served as a platform to test the concept of park-based care with a professional audience, gathering their reactions and questions to refine arguments. The events provided further insights into the value of place-based care and contributed to the development of the “ingredients of place-based care,” which are explored further in Chapters 4 and 16. Attendees' questions were helpful in indicating areas that might require further development or reflection.

Treating Participants Ethically and With Care

In alignment with this research’s core values, a key goal of this study was to treat research participants ethically and with care. An IRB application to the University of Washington’s Human Subjects Division guided this process.⁴⁹ This application outlined a strategy for conducting the research ethically and respectfully. It included information on how participants’ privacy would be protected and how research data would be securely stored. It stated that every interviewee would be asked for their consent to be audio-recorded and included efforts to ensure participants provided informed consent, such as actively looking for visual clues that might indicate confusion or uncertainty about what they were agreeing to. A copy of the consent form for research participation, signed by every interviewee, is in Appendix F.

⁴⁹ The application was approved July 18, 2023.

However, understanding the ethical obligations and considerations related to research extends beyond the IRB review process and requires ongoing personal judgment, particularly when out in the field (Tuck et al., 2014). For instance, Tuck (2009) cautions against conducting research focused on collecting narratives of pain, describing such work as “damage-centered” and operating on a deficit model by emphasizing stories of suffering in an attempt to hold those in power accountable (p. 409).

This study recognizes the risk of contributing to the stigmatization of individuals experiencing houselessness. Additionally, power dynamics had to be considered. As a white, British, cisgender, middle-class woman who has not experienced houselessness firsthand, my request to speak with unhoused people using parks could be intrusive or feel worrying or threatening. To mitigate this risk, I collaborated with Facing Homelessness, a community-based nonprofit organization in Seattle where I also volunteered.⁵⁰ They helped facilitate connections with individuals and vouched for my intentions.⁵¹ Furthermore, an outreach worker from REACH, a program active in the King County area supporting those experiencing houselessness, invited me to accompany him on a visit to an encampment in a Seattle park and facilitated introductions to people living there.⁵²

The 11 interviewees experiencing houselessness were treated differently from the professionally situated interviewees. The unhoused interviewees were not asked to provide their names or any identifying information, though some shared their names during conversations; all

⁵⁰ I started volunteering for Facing Homelessness in September 2023.

⁵¹ Facing Homelessness has subsequently lost its office space due to a lack of funding but still organizes support for people experiencing houselessness. For more information:

<https://facinghomelessness.org/>

⁵² REACH is the name of the organization not an acronym.

names used in this research are fictional. Each unhoused interviewee received a \$20 Starbucks gift card as compensation for their time, reflecting the minimum hourly wage in Seattle at that time and recognizing the effort involved in participating in the study. The professional interviewees were not compensated, as they were interviewed during their working day and were receiving a salary.

Costley (2010) discusses how researchers can embody an ethic of care in their approach. For instance, this includes keeping interviewees informed, being sensitive to context, modeling values of empathy, expressing gratitude, and actively working to ensure research is mutually beneficial (Costley, 2010). At the beginning of each interview, I emphasized that participants could skip questions or end the conversation at any time. I aimed to project a compassionate, empathetic demeanor to help participants feel at ease and reduce the risk of distress. I did not interview anyone who expressed uncertainty or concern about speaking. The shortest interview was with an individual experiencing homelessness, which lasted only nine minutes; it ended early when the participant became agitated, expressing that he felt unsafe.

Manzo and de Carvalho's (2020) four "hallmarks of rigor" for qualitative research served as important guides for this research. These hallmarks prioritize sensitivity to context, maintaining transparency regarding the research process, involving research participants in truth-testing, and centering accountability to the broader community (Manzo & de Carvalho 2020, p. 112). The hallmarks demonstrate care by reducing the risk that the research becomes "extractive," going beyond mere data gathering to focus on giving back to the communities involved (Manzo & de Carvalho, 2020; TallBear, 2014).

In honor of these hallmarks, ongoing relationships with research participants were sought by keeping them updated about the study's progress and sharing emerging results. For example,

the lead interviewees in each case study received draft copies of the material presented in Chapters 12 through to 14 and were invited to provide feedback. Their comments and clarifications were invaluable in shaping the final case studies. The presentations at the four national events, detailed above, were designed to share emerging research findings with the broader park and recreation community, offering an opportunity to help improve the ability of those working in the field to respond in a caring way to issues related to homelessness.

Statement of My Positionality

In my first professional role as a Research Assistant at the London School of Economics, I was trained to believe that a researcher should be detached and neutral, otherwise it would unduly influence interviewees and skew research findings towards personal preferences. Mastrangelo and L'Eplattenier (2008), writing about their experience conducting archival research, observe: “we struggle to keep in mind our subjectivity, our positions, our ideological lenses, our own agendas” (p. 164). However, Sandercock (2003) argues that there are no objective answers in public policy, as all answers are shaped by our personal values (p. 196).

Through this research, I have moved beyond my initial training and no longer hold the belief that complete neutrality is achievable during the research process. Haraway (1988) notes that everything we learn is partial and interpretive: “feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (p. 583). The choice of doctoral study subject is not impartial (Gold, 2002). I recognize that I bring a specific positionality and set of values into my rationale for pursuing this study topic, as I believe a just society should not leave its poorest or most vulnerable individuals without support. I interpret the visibility of homeless populations in public spaces as evidence of injustice and a

symptom of systemic breakdown originating from the failures of capitalism. I contend that public institutions, such as public park agencies, have a significant role to play in assisting people experiencing houselessness, and we should allocate more public resources to this cause while rethinking the contemporary focus of these organizations.

Ultimately, the motivation for pursuing this research stems from a desire for change, which predisposes me to a particular standpoint filtered through my lived experiences. The analysis of the meaning and intent behind the responses given by research participants is grounded in my interpretation. To aid balance within this dissertation, I have drawn from a wide variety of sources and strived for transparency in my reasoning and findings.

Process of Analysis

There is no single formula for qualitative data analysis. Qualitative research is highly interpretative and relies on personal judgment to move data into the status of “findings” (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Drisko & Maschi, 2016). This process of judgment is influenced by the researcher’s positionality, which is discussed above.

The study used an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to derive frequent common themes and patterns across the data, aiming to identify how this information could address the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Grounded theory was utilized to analyze and manage the research data. As originally defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the advantage of this approach is that it allows researchers to adopt a flexible, analytical, and methodical stance to tackle specific questions and fill gaps in knowledge (Charmaz, 2004), thus enabling theories to be systematically obtained or “discovered” from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory analysis consists of three iterative stages: coding and theorizing from the outset; “memoing” and ongoing theorizing throughout the study; and refining and writing up theories grounded in the findings (Bernard & Ryan, 2017). The analysis commenced with an “initial” or “open” coding phase, which involved a systematic line-by-line review of interview transcripts and other research materials such as field and interview notes (Bernard & Ryan, 2017; Charmaz, 2004). This phase of coding allows links to be made across different data sources (Charmaz, 2004). An emergent coding strategy was employed, in which labels were developed after a small number of interviews, acknowledging that these codes would evolve as the study progressed.

Following the open coding phase, a “selective” or “focused” coding stage was conducted, which identified the more frequent codes and explored their connections, ultimately generating the final coding categories (Charmaz, 2004). The coding framework produced in this process was regularly reviewed, and notes were compiled regarding the rationale for the chosen labels, as well as observations about emerging gaps in the analysis, questions arising, ambiguities, and other relevant considerations. This stage is called “memoing,” and the notes were important in guiding the research as it developed, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bernard & Ryan, 2017). The final codebook, consisting of 10 parent codes and 57 child codes, is provided in Appendix G. This was compiled using NVivo.

Study Methods Limitations

This study has four limitations regarding its focus and scope, highlighting interesting areas that merit further investigation. First, the study relied on individuals voluntarily agreeing to participate. Overall, professionals in Atlanta, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. were willing to

engage in conversation. Most of the individuals who were approached to participate agreed to do so. However, it was not possible to interview certain teams within Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR). This included the Encampment and Special Teams Unit, which has direct responsibility for responding to issues related to houselessness in Seattle's parks. It was also not possible to secure interviews with the Park Rangers, Park Concierges, or grounds maintenance staff.⁵³ These teams did not respond to the emailed requests for participation. In an email sent in November 2023, the Public Affairs Office of SPR asked me to refrain from reaching out to these teams and to direct inquiries instead to then-Mayor Bruce Harrell's office.

Despite these challenges, it was important to continue pursuing conversations with individuals in these roles. Some SPR interviewees identified the Park Concierges and Park Rangers as the positions most affected by houselessness. During visits to downtown Seattle parks, four Park Concierges agreed to speak anonymously, and their insights are included in Chapter 8. Additionally, two staff members with extensive knowledge of the Concierges' work were also interviewed. As it was not possible to speak with Park Rangers or members of the Encampment and Special Teams Unit, the information related to these roles in Chapter 8 is based on responses from other study participants with experience of encampment removals, or insight into their roles because they work in partnership with these teams. Furthermore, I did not secure an interview with the Seattle Parks Foundation or the King County Regional Homeless Authority.⁵⁴

⁵³ Early in the study I was able to interview one grounds maintenance worker.

⁵⁴ Informally I was told that the Seattle Parks Foundation did not feel comfortable commenting on issues relating to houselessness in parks.

These ‘dead ends’ reflect the reality of conducting research in areas where houselessness is increasing. These challenges also highlight the contentious nature of this significant local issue in Seattle. While these limitations impact on the research, the challenges encountered in engaging participants also underscore the complexities involved in delivering care in a constantly evolving context. Chapters 15 and 16 further discuss the practicalities of park-based care.

Second, the study was limited by the level of information participants were willing to provide. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it was sometimes challenging for individuals to speak openly. This hesitance was particularly evident among less senior Seattle Park and Recreation professionals, some of whom expressed concerns about potentially contradicting the agency’s official policy or stance on houselessness in public spaces. Some were unsure whether they were permitted to comment on the city’s encampment-removal policy, fearing they might say the wrong thing. Others worried about the possibility of negative press or how I might use the information. Responses in Chapters 6 to 10 are anonymized while still indicating people’s job responsibilities.⁵⁵

To mitigate these challenges, a diverse group of participants at various levels of seniority were recruited for the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and that, if required, they could select the job description associated with their interview transcript. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants; some opted for private spaces, such as meeting rooms, to ensure their privacy.

Additionally, the research relies heavily on self-reported data from interviewees. There is limited published evidence to draw on; for example, neither case study city has commissioned an

⁵⁵ One interviewee asked for their responses to be anonymized and that no indication of their job be provided.

independent evaluation of their approaches. To validate and check the accuracy of information, the information gathered during interviews was cross-referenced with site observations, the literature, and information provided by other participants. However, this process is acknowledged to be imperfect. Chapter 15, which explores lessons from the case studies, further discusses the challenges to building a comprehensive assessment of the benefits of place-based care.

Third, the focus of this study is urban. In their recent research, Pitas et al. (2025a) argue that there is an overreliance on studies centered on major urban areas when examining houselessness. They argue that this perspective is overrepresented in understandings of the issue. However, the challenges of houselessness are most concentrated in urban settings, with most individuals experiencing houselessness in U.S. towns and cities (HUD, 2024b). Chapter 12 explains the rationale for choosing the specific case studies, which was guided by the search for innovative park-based caring actions and focused on areas with a history of actively responding to houselessness.

Finally, the research focused on the perceptions of two groups: professionals working in public parks and recreation or in services relating to houselessness, and individuals experiencing houselessness. The perspectives of housed members of the public regarding the role of park and recreation agencies in responding to houselessness were outside the scope of this research. As discussed in Chapter 4, recent studies (Pitas et al., 2023; Pitas et al., 2025a) have examined public attitudes toward park agency actions to support people experiencing houselessness and potential park management responses. This remains an underexplored area where more research would be beneficial (Pitas et al., 2023). Areas for future research are provided in Chapter 16.

Organization of Findings

The findings from this qualitative study are presented in the following two sections.

“Section II: Seattle - Parks, Recreation, and Houselessness” and **“Section III: Place-based Care.”** **Section II** focuses on the results from the first stage of fieldwork conducted in the City of Seattle. It is based on interviews with 38 professionals and ten individuals experiencing houselessness. **Section III** presents the results of the second stage of fieldwork, which includes 21 interviews with professionals and one individual experiencing houselessness (in Washington, D.C.)⁵⁶ This section provides three city case studies and discusses the lessons learned, highlighting the value of park-based care and its potential to inform future public park and recreation management.

The next **Section II** commences with Chapter 6, which explores the Seattle context and its responses to houselessness. The chapter discusses the city’s severe shortage of affordable housing and the increasing number of individuals experiencing houselessness. It also examines the initiatives implemented by various city agencies, including Seattle Parks and Recreation, that either address the needs of unhoused individuals or contribute to their marginalization.

⁵⁶ The second stage of fieldwork primarily focused on interviews with the three case study organizations but there was also an opportunity to speak with an individual experiencing houselessness in Washington, D.C. His perspectives are included in **Section III**.

Section II: Seattle - Parks, Recreation, and Houselessness

Chapter Six: The City of Seattle - Context

Introduction

The City of Seattle is an important example of an urban area managing extensive public park and recreation amenities amid significant, increasing houselessness. Referred to as the Emerald City for its abundant green spaces and nearby forests and mountains, Seattle is ranked eighth in the nation for the quality of its parks and recreation system by the Trust for Public Land (TPL, 2025).⁵⁷ It is often highlighted as a good practice example for public park and recreation management due to its commitments to sustainability and equity (Dooling et al., 2006; Rice, 2010; Hou, 2012; Nagel, 2017; Beck et al., 2024).

Seattle also has the fourth-largest population nationally of people experiencing houselessness.⁵⁸ A high rate (58%) of this population experiences unsheltered houselessness, meaning they reside in places not meant for human habitation (HUD, 2024a, 2024b). Many of these individuals depend on Seattle's public spaces and freely accessible amenities, such as parks and libraries, for their daily shelter and survival.

This chapter provides relevant context on Seattle's limited affordable housing availability and the rising number of people experiencing houselessness in the city. It examines the management of the city's many parks and open spaces by the public agency Seattle Parks and

⁵⁷ ParkScore assesses five park system qualities: access, equity, acreage, investment, and amenities (TPL, 2025).

⁵⁸ After New York City CoC, Los Angeles City and County CoC and Chicago CoC (HUD, 2024).

Recreation (SPR) and presents a summary of data on park use by individuals experiencing houselessness in Seattle. Subsequent sections examine key publicly funded responses to the significant growth in houselessness in Seattle over the past decade. They provide brief context on regional efforts to address houselessness, including Seattle, and a summary of initiatives led by the City of Seattle.

Finally, this chapter explores four responses by SPR aimed at either addressing the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness using their spaces and recreation amenities or removing unsheltered populations from park spaces. The information in this chapter is essential for understanding the context of the interview findings that follow. Subsequent chapters explore the experiences of interviewees working for SPR and other Seattle-based organizations, as well as individuals experiencing houselessness in the city.

Income and Housing Inequity

Seattle is one of the most expensive places to live in the United States. According to the Council for Community and Economic Research, it is the fifth most costly city nationwide, with prices in the Seattle metropolitan area nearly 13% higher than the national average, and housing costs 50% greater than the national average (C2ER, 2019; Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2024; Fu, 2024). Although the average hourly wage in Seattle is \$43.16 – compared to the nationwide average of \$32.66 – around 9% of Seattle’s residents live below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Census data drawn from the American Community Survey shows Seattle’s top fifth of earners enjoy 53% of the city’s total income, while the bottom fifth receives just 2% (Westneat, 2023).

Alongside Seattle’s income inequity, a chronic shortage of affordable housing has created particularly difficult conditions for low-income residents. More than a third of Seattle’s renter households are classified as “cost-burdened,” and Black households are disproportionately affected – 57% of Black renter households in the city are classified as cost-burdened (BERK, 2021).⁵⁹

Like many U.S. cities, Seattle has traditionally focused its residential land use zoning on single-family homes. This has resulted in a restricted housing supply and a lack of multi-family housing (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Furthermore, over the past 15 years, the city has experienced rapid population growth driven by the technology industry (Seattle Planning Commission, 2020). However, Seattle’s housing supply has not kept pace with its growth.

In 2025, Seattle’s population reached 816,600 residents and is projected to reach one million by 2050 (Seattle OPCD, 2025; Washington State OFM, 2025).⁶⁰ The city is defined as a ‘Tier 1 City’ for tech talent, because the technology sector now makes up 30% of the local economy, second in the nation only to San Jose, California, with approximately 12% of Seattle’s workforce currently employed in technology (Walker, 2022; CompTIA, 2025).⁶¹

The benefits of Seattle’s growth have not been equally distributed (Seattle OPCD, 2025). The legacy of redlining and discriminatory housing policies, alongside systemic racism, has resulted in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) households being disproportionately displaced due to the city’s growing gentrification (Seattle.gov, n.d.; Seattle OPCD, 2025). The

⁵⁹ Cost-burdened is defined as spending more than 30% of household income on housing. Exact percentage of Seattle’s cost-burdened households is not provided.

⁶⁰ An increase of around 2% from the previous year (Balk, 2025).

⁶¹ Figures provided are for the Seattle metropolitan area: the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA Metropolitan Statistical Area.

poverty rate for people of color is more than two and a half times that of the city’s white, non-Hispanic population (Seattle OPCD, 2023), and Black and Hispanic households in Seattle are four times more likely to experience food insecurity than white households (City of Seattle, 2024a).

State of Emergency for Houselessness

In 2015, the City of Seattle declared a State of Emergency for houselessness, identifying it as a human-made crisis equivalent to a natural disaster (City of Seattle, 2015a; Ensign, 2021). Over the past decade, the number of houseless individuals residing in Seattle has continued to rise. Washington State’s latest annual point-in-time count for the Seattle-King County area, conducted in January 2024, indicated a 26% increase in the number of people experiencing houselessness and a catastrophic 78% increase in chronic houselessness since the previous count in 2022 (KCRHA, 2024a).⁶²

Currently, 16,868 people are experiencing houselessness in the Seattle-King County area.⁶³ Of these, more than half (9,810 individuals) are living unsheltered, sleeping in places such as sidewalks, underpasses, vehicles, and green spaces (HUD, 2024b). Among those 9,810 individuals living unsheltered, 20% are children aged under 18 years of age (KCRHA, 2024b).

The rate of unsheltered houselessness in Seattle (58%) is significantly higher than the national average of 36% and contrasts sharply with other U.S cities that prioritize the provision of adequate shelter. For example, in New York, due to the city’s “right to shelter” mandate, 90%

⁶² Data was not collected in 2025 because King County conducts its comprehensive unsheltered count in even-numbered years (<https://kcrha.org/community-data/king-county-point-in-time-count/>). These figures are likely to be an under-count as they focus on visible houselessness on one night in winter.

⁶³ These figures are unsheltered houselessness plus those who are houseless but in shelter.

of the houseless population resides in temporary shelters (Love & Loh, 2023). In contrast, Seattle's shelter capacity is limited, with only 5,300 beds available for the entire Seattle-King County area (KCRHA, 2023b). As a result, rates of unsheltered houselessness remain high in Seattle (Colburn & Aldern, 2022).

Communities of color are disproportionately affected by houselessness. In the Seattle-King County area, 7% of adults in the population at large identify as Black or African American, yet they make up 15% of the houseless population (KCRHA, 2024b). Native Americans and Alaska Natives constitute less than 1% of King County's population but account for over 6% of the county's houseless individuals (KCRHA, 2024b).

Houselessness in Seattle is not new. Josephine Ensign's (2021) book, *Skid Road*, traces the historical roots of poverty and houselessness in Seattle, starting with the first officially recorded unhoused individual in the Belltown neighborhood in 1854. Ensign's research documents the "shacktowns" that emerged in Seattle during the Great Depression in the 1930s, on city land and within parks such as Green Lake. At the time, one of these shacktowns was among the largest in the nation. These encampments were eventually forcibly removed and destroyed, echoing the city's contemporary punitive policies against shelters in parks (Ensign, 2021).

In recent years, concern in Seattle has increased regarding the impact of visible houselessness on the city and its residents. A controversial 2019 documentary, *Seattle is Dying*, aired by KOMO-TV, featured footage of encampments strewn with trash and was accompanied by alarmist, rhetoric-filled commentary. The documentary filmed vulnerable individuals, disrespecting their privacy by not blurring their faces, and placed blame for the city's crisis on drug-addicted houseless individuals (Ensign, 2021; Manzo & Desanto, 2021).

In 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the Seattle-King County area, and the city is still recovering from the pandemic, which upended daily life (City of Seattle, 2024b). During the early stages of the pandemic, following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), houseless individuals living outside in public spaces in cities such as Seattle were allowed to shelter in place (Brownstone & Beekman, 2020). This policy effectively “froze” many individuals in the places they were utilizing for shelter, such as Seattle’s public parks and sidewalks, as municipalities sought to limit the virus’s spread. Some downtown areas of Seattle saw a roughly 50% increase in the number of tents between December 2019 and July 2020 as the surrounding offices and businesses emptied of workers (Snedker et al., 2025).

Visible and extensive tent encampments, for instance, in City Hall Park in downtown Seattle and other key Seattle spaces such as Woodland Park, Cal Anderson Park, and Ballard Commons, took years to remove following the pandemic.⁶⁴ City Hall Park and Ballard Commons were closed for several years, but have since reopened after repairs. Some interviewees mentioned the lasting effects of the shelter-in-place policy; more information on this policy and interviewees’ experiences can be found in Appendix H.

Today, the issue of houselessness remains challenging. As increasing numbers of workers return to their offices following the pandemic, Seattle’s downtown area is gradually becoming busier (DSA, 2025a). However, the city has been hampered by a damaging synthetic opioid crisis, with overdoses occurring at a disproportionate rate among individuals who are unsheltered

⁶⁴ Cal Anderson Park was also the location of the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP), also known as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), that was established in June 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd. This served as a campground and space for people to gather and included a community garden. Most of this was cleared after three weeks, apart from the garden which was eventually removed by the city in December 2023. Damage to the landscape and the park’s infrastructure is still being repaired.

or those who have recently experienced houselessness (King County Medical Examiner, n.d.; Housen, 2024; Shader et al., 2024).⁶⁵ Despite increasing criminalization, houselessness remains highly visible in Seattle. Due to a lack of alternatives, individuals experiencing houselessness continue to seek shelter in the city's parks and public spaces, including in some of Seattle's wealthiest neighborhoods.

As a result, houselessness is a significant political issue in the city, driving many political conversations and informing debates about the operation of Seattle's public services, including public parks and recreation. The issue of houselessness prominently featured in mayoral debates in autumn 2025. The incumbent Mayor Bruce Harrell highlighted housing and houselessness as one of his top four priority areas, alongside public safety, climate change, and income inequality (Daniels, 2024). The new Mayor, Katie Wilson, elected in November 2025, ran for office on a platform that focused on tackling the housing and affordability crises in Seattle. Her policy commitments include increasing emergency shelter provision and building more affordable housing (DSA, 2025b).

Seattle's Park and Recreation Services

Seattle is home to abundant green and open spaces. It is one of the best-preserved Olmsted park systems in the nation, with just over 12% of Seattle consisting of public park land (Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks, n.d.; TPL, 2025; Dooling et al., 2006). The city agency,

⁶⁵ The downtown areas that include the Belltown neighborhood and locations around Pioneer Square and Third Avenue are particularly impacted (Shader et al., 2024). These areas continue to see significant numbers of fatal overdoses, but numbers have decreased since their peak in 2023 (source: <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/health-safety/medical-examiner/reports-dashboards/overdose-deaths-dashboard>). Shader et al., find that fatal overdoses among those living unhoused, or in emergency shelters, in King County have increased from 12% of the total in 2020 to 24% of the total in 2023.

Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR), oversees 6,441 acres of land that include 489 public parks, 25 community centers, 10 swimming pools, and 120 miles of trails. SPR also operates athletic fields, sports courts, playgrounds, education centers, community gardens, and natural areas. (Seattle.gov, 2025a). Figure 6.1 below summarizes SPR's areas of operation.

Figure 6.1: Seattle Parks and Recreation Areas of Operation



Source: Seattle Parks and Recreation, 2024b.

SPR consists of eight divisions (also known as branches) and employs approximately 1,139 staff (SPR, 2025a).^{66,67} Its mission statement emphasizes SPR's role in supporting well-being and promoting community life via safe and accessible parks and recreation amenities, stating:

Seattle Parks and Recreation equips employees and the public for well-being as we support healthy people, a thriving environment and vibrant community. We provide safe and accessible spaces for residents and visitors to work, recreate, rejuvenate and enhance quality of life and wellness for children, teenagers, adults and seniors (Seattle.gov, 2025a).

Figure 6.2 below presents SPR's structure.

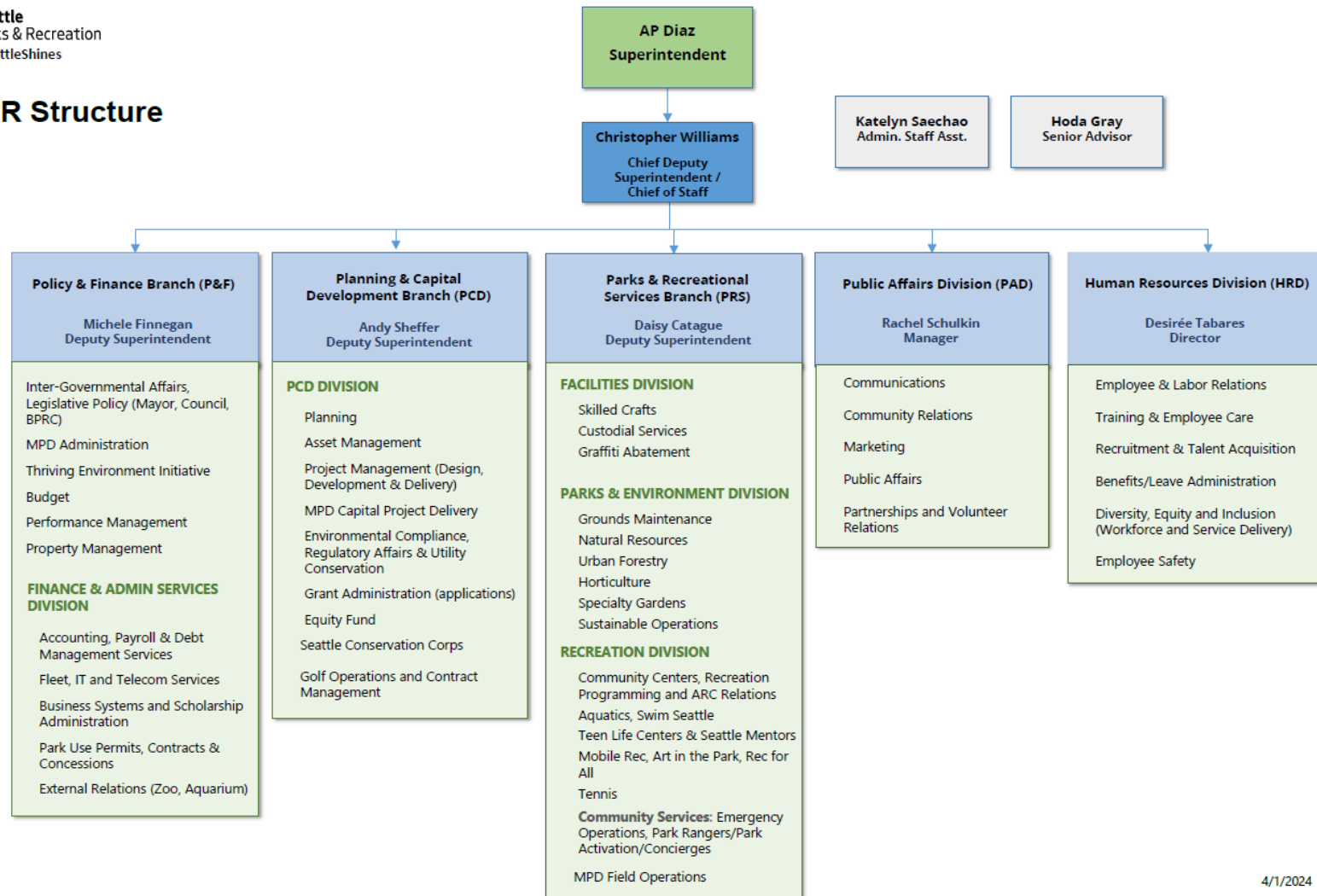
⁶⁶ The eight divisions are Public Affairs, Human Resources, Policy and Finance, Finance and Administration, Planning and Capital Development, Parks and Environment, Facilities, and Recreation.

⁶⁷ Detailed information on staffing numbers is not provided. The 1,139 figure is full-time equivalent (FTE) and likely includes part-time or short-term, seasonal staff.

Figure 6.2: Seattle Parks and Recreation Structure



SPR Structure



4/1/2024

Source: City of Seattle Public Records Request Center, October 29th, 2025.

Funding for parks and recreation amenities in Seattle comes from the Seattle Park District, created in 2014 after voters approved a property tax levy (City of Seattle, n.d.-a). The National Recreation and Park Association highlights this funding model as an innovative approach to financing public parks (NRPA, 2018). In 2025, the levy contributed approximately \$122 million (City of Seattle, 2024d).⁶⁸

Seattle's park system was guided by the vision of John C. Olmsted, whose 1903 plan created an extensive vision of spaces for the city, including parks, playfields, and playgrounds (Dooling et al., 2006). Today, SPR is responsible for a diverse portfolio of public parks, illustrated in Table 6.1 below, many of which include access to beaches and shorelines, viewpoints, and ecological features (SPR, 2024a). However, park space is not distributed equitably across the city; low-income neighborhoods have 43% less park space than high-income neighborhoods. Yet, despite this inequity, 99% of Seattle's residents live within a ten-minute walk of a park (TPL, 2025).

⁶⁸ Other sources of funding include the Seattle General Fund, the King County Parks Levy and earned revenue from fees, room hire etc. Additionally, over the past 25 years the Seattle Parks Foundation, a philanthropic civic organization, has contributed over \$90 million towards work focused on Seattle's parks and open spaces (Seattle Parks Foundation, 2025).

Table 6.1: Classification of Seattle’s Park Types by Percentage of Acres

Classification	Example	Percent
Boulevards, green streets, greenways	Lake Washington Boulevard	6.1
Community parks	Matthews Beach Park	11.3
Downtown parks	Denny Park (Seattle’s first park)	0.6
Greenbelts and natural areas	Duwamish Head Greenbelt	22.2
Mini parks and pocket parks	Kinnear Place	0.7
Neighborhood parks	Columbia Park	9.3
Regional parks	Seward Park	43.1
Special use and specialty gardens ⁶⁹	Woodland Park Zoo	6.5

Source: SPR, 2024a.

Seattle’s flagship parks include historic Volunteer Park, which includes the Seattle Asian Art Museum; Gas Works Park, a unique park built on the site of a decommissioned Seattle Gas Light Company coal gasification plant; Freeway Park, the first park in the world constructed over a freeway (also examined in Chapter 12); and Seward Park, awarded America’s second Green Flag Award (Way, 2013; Freeway Park Association, 2025).⁷⁰ Park development continues in the city. Seattle’s newest park, the 20-acre Waterfront Park, opened in September 2025 and has re-established a valuable, direct connection from the city’s downtown to its waterfront (Friends of Waterfront Park, 2026).

⁶⁹ Stand-alone parks that serve one use.

⁷⁰ The Green Flag Award is a scheme that works internationally, accrediting well-managed, high-quality parks and green spaces (www.greenflagaward.org/).

Parks and Houselessness

Due to the high number of individuals experiencing unsheltered houselessness in Seattle, the use of parks for overnight shelter is a significant issue for SPR. In October 2022, SPR's incoming Parks Superintendent, Anthony-Paul Diaz, committed to keeping parks clear of encampments, stating in his first interview with *The Seattle Times*: “we do not want our park system to be de facto housing” (Zhou, 2022). SPR's 2025-2028 Strategic Plan states that the agency's responsibilities regarding houselessness are to uplift individuals experiencing houselessness through job training and “respectful” participation in encampment sweeps led by the Mayor's Unified Care Team (SPR, 2025b, p. 13). Both responsibilities are discussed in the sections below.

The latest quarterly data released by the City of Seattle (June 2025) recorded 259 tents and 172 RVs located in the city's streets, parks, and public spaces (City of Seattle, 2025).⁷¹ While these figures provide a general location, it is not possible to determine the exact placement of these structures. Nonetheless, some tents and RVs will certainly be situated in spaces owned and managed by SPR.

A comparison with data from previous quarters shows a reduction in tents and RVs over the last 18 months. For example, in December 2023, 523 tents and 227 RVs were recorded in Seattle's public space. However, houselessness in the city has continued to grow during this timeframe. The decline in tents and RVs is likely not due to more people finding shelter but rather to the city removing more vehicles and tents (Oron, 2024). The sections below discuss the

⁷¹ The latest figures available. The website is no longer being updated due to a change in Seattle's Mayor.

rapid rise in encampment removals in Seattle and SPR's role in forcibly clearing unhoused populations from their spaces.

There are a limited number of studies focused on Seattle that explore various aspects of life among people who are houseless in the city. For example, research examines the rights of tent encampment residents to privacy (Sparks, 2010), the self-management practices observed in Seattle's Tent City 3 (Sparks, 2017, 2024), perspectives of "home" held by Tent City 3's residents (Al-Abweh, 2017), professional perspectives on the benefits of nature exposure for individuals experiencing unsheltered houselessness (Derrien et al., 2024), and the locations of tent encampments in relation to amenities and services in the city (Sutton et al., 2026).

However, as mentioned earlier, the literature review for this study did not yield any Seattle-focused research that explores the use of urban public parks by houseless populations or the management of the city's public park and recreation amenities amid chronic unsheltered houselessness. One study (Derrien et al., 2023) examines the impact of unsheltered houselessness on public land management in the Seattle area, but it takes a broader perspective by including urban to wildland areas, which include authorized campsites.

To address important information gaps in the management of urban parks with houseless populations, this study includes interviews with individuals experiencing chronic houselessness in Seattle. Interviewees emphasized the importance of Seattle's public parks for their daily survival, highlighting how these spaces provide access to fresh water, bathrooms, and hygiene services, as well as offering a place to find respite and relaxation away from the busy city. Some individuals spoke of the efforts they make to keep the spaces they use clean and sanitary. Chapter

10 presents these responses, while Chapter 16 discusses where additional research would be most beneficial.

Publicly Funded Responses to Houselessness in Seattle

Seattle is widely regarded as a progressive city (Beckett & Herbet, 2010), yet its public policy regarding houselessness is a contradictory mix of supportive measures and punitive actions. On the one hand, some initiatives seek to support unhoused populations, such as improving access to housing and medical treatment. On the other hand, some measures seek to control behavior and forcibly remove individuals from public space. This mix of different approaches to addressing houselessness is problematic and adds to the marginalization of unhoused populations. The efficacy of support initiatives for these individuals are undermined by punitive measures such as encampment removals. When people experiencing houselessness are forced to relocate, they may lose important belongings, such as identification documents. This disruption makes it more difficult for them to access services and maintain contact with case managers, further contributing to their instability.

Given the complexity and breadth of publicly funded responses to houselessness in Seattle, the following sections highlight the most relevant regional and city policies concerning chronic, unsheltered houselessness. Regional efforts to address houselessness are examined first, followed by initiatives led by the City of Seattle. The chapter concludes with an examination of four key SPR responses to houselessness.

Regional Responses

As the most populous city in Washington state and home to the largest population experiencing houselessness, Seattle is a key player in regional efforts to address houselessness. The King County Regional Homeless Authority (KCRHA) was established in December 2019 as an independent public entity whose mission is to reduce houselessness by systematizing responses, services, and policies across the 39 cities in King County, including Seattle (KCRHA, 2021). The City of Seattle is the largest funder of the KCRHA, providing 53% of its 2025 budget (KCRHA, 2024d).⁷²

In 2022, the KCRHA assumed management of homeless response systems in Seattle (Office of the WSA, 2025).⁷³ It operates a coordinated referral process for houseless services across King County and makes decisions using principles of social justice and equity (KCRHA, 2023a). The KCRHA is the lead entity for the federally mandated King County Continuum of Care, a partnership of local government agencies, service providers, and nonprofits that work together to coordinate King County's responses for individuals experiencing houselessness.⁷⁴ In 2024, the KCRHA managed approximately 3,200 emergency shelter spaces funded by the City of Seattle (City of Seattle, 2024c).

⁷² Funding contributions, KCRHA's 2025 budget: 53% from the City of Seattle, 26% King County, 11% HUD Continuum of Care, 10% Department of Commerce, and 1% North King County ILA.

⁷³ Prior to this Seattle's Human Services Department managed homeless responses for the city. A performance audit by the Washington State Auditor of Seattle's houseless programs criticized the way services were identified and prioritized and highlighted the poor management of service provider organizations (Office of the WSA, 2023).

⁷⁴ It also administers programs and services and manages the King County Homeless Management Information System (KCRHA, n.d.). This collects and tracks data on houselessness and responses in the King County area. More information is available: <https://kcrha.org/regional-homelessness-data/>

However, the KCRHA has faced criticism for exhibiting a lack of consistency and transparency, poor financial practices including failing to pay service providers on time, and a lack of coordination (King County DCHS, 2022; KCRHA, 2023a; Kim, 2023). In August 2025, *The Seattle Times* reported that Pierce County – home to the second-largest houseless population in the Seattle-King County area - was considering establishing its own county-wide approach to address concerns about the KCRHA’s performance (Kim, 2025). An audit published in April 2026 identified additional serious concerns with KCRHA financial and internal control systems (KCRHA, 2026). At the time of writing, King County Council and Seattle City Council were evaluating next steps in response to the audit (Office of the City Clerk, 2026).

Poor performance by the KCRHA has directly affected efforts to address chronic houselessness in Seattle. For example, the Partnership for Zero initiative was launched by the KCRHA in 2022 in partnership with the City of Seattle and other private and philanthropic organizations. This was an ambitious and innovative project aimed at eliminating visible houselessness in downtown Seattle by intensively supporting unsheltered individuals. Partnership for Zero aimed to develop a “by name list” of individuals using outreach workers to develop trust, deliver support, and access services (KCRHA, 2023a). Unfortunately, this initiative was abruptly terminated by the KCRHA in 2023 due to disappointing results, which adversely affected other downtown agencies and significantly reduced services for the area’s unhoused population (see Appendix I).

In addition to the KCRHA, a plethora of agencies within the Seattle-King County area also provide services for people experiencing houselessness, often with overlapping responsibilities. The nonprofit Real Change, which produces “The Emerald City Resource

Guide,” identifies over 500 service providers in the Seattle area offering support to people living on a low income or experiencing houselessness (Campbell, 2019). Table 6.2 below provides examples of some of the best-known organizations offering services to individuals experiencing houselessness in the Seattle-King County area, as mentioned by this study’s participants.

Table 6.2: Examples of Organizations Providing Services to the Houseless

Organization	Area of Operation	Examples of Services Provided
King County Health Through Housing (HTH) Initiative	Seven King County cities: Auburn, Burien, Federal Way, Kirkland, Redmond, Renton, and Seattle	Subsidized housing, health services, access to social support.
REACH ⁷⁵	King County	Street level outreach, intensive case management, connection to mental and physical health services, assistance with housing, targeted support for repeat offenders.
The Salvation Army	King County	Assistance with housing, emergency shelter, meals, street level outreach, substance-misuse treatment services.
SHARE/WHEEL ⁷⁶	King County (shelters located in Seattle neighborhoods and tent cities move but are located in Seattle area).	Provision of housing shelters and two Tent Cities, storage and hygiene services, operates a housing-for-work program.
Compass Housing Alliance	Puget Sound region which includes King County	Provision of housing shelters, access to affordable housing, hygiene and meal services, case management.

Sources: REACH, n.d.; SHARE/WHEEL, n.d.; Compass Housing Alliance, 2024; King County, 2024; Salvation Army, 2024.

⁷⁵ Name of organization, not an acronym.

⁷⁶ SHARE is Seattle Housing and Resource Effort, co-ed, and WHEEL is the Women's Housing, Equality and Enhancement League, which is women-only (www.sharewheel.org/about-us).

One initiative included in the table is the King County Health Through Housing (HTH) Initiative, which promotes access to housing for individuals experiencing chronic houselessness. Funded by a 0.1% sales tax, this program follows an innovative Housing First approach, prioritizing the transition of individuals experiencing chronic houselessness into permanent supportive housing as a foundational step for stabilizing their lives (King County, 2021, 2024). The initiative serves people with complex needs across seven cities, including Seattle, and in 2024, it assisted 1,281 people, although a specific count for Seattle was not available (King County, 2025).

City-Driven Responses

City-driven, publicly funded responses to houselessness in Seattle are extensive and complex. The city has implemented a combination of innovative, forward-thinking responses alongside punitive and restrictive measures that rely on enforcement and processes of displacement.

An extensive nonprofit sector supports responses to houselessness in Seattle. In 2024, outreach workers contracted by the City of Seattle connected 1,800 individuals to shelter and services (City of Seattle: Mayor Harrell, 2025). However, like other West Coast cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Portland, which also have large unsheltered populations, Seattle's supportive efforts have struggled to bridge the gap between providing immediate (but temporary) solutions such as short-term shelter beds and long-term permanent solutions focused on transitioning individuals to stable housing (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Sutton et al., 2026).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Future research would be valuable to understand the national picture in terms of different city responses to houselessness.

In downtown Seattle, the Third Avenue Project - delivered by a coalition that includes the City of Seattle, local outreach organizations, the Downtown Seattle Association, and local businesses - takes a hybrid approach, combining specialized outreach to unsheltered populations via the We Deliver Care team and intensive policing and enforcement (Beckett & Brydolf-Horwitz, 2023; Kim, 2023a; Dalgetty, 2024c).

An increasingly important policy, led by the Mayor's Unified Care Team (UCT), is the removal of houseless encampments, commonly referred to as "sweeps," also discussed in Chapter 3.⁷⁸ In the City of Seattle, once an "unauthorized" encampment is identified, residents are issued a 72-hour notice to pack up and leave the area before city staff arrive to remove their belongings. Outreach workers are expected to engage with residents before the removal process to connect them with shelter and services, and to offer storage for those unable to move their possessions (City of Seattle Human Services, n.d.).⁷⁹

Analysis of public record data by Guy Oron for *Real Change News* found that, following a pause during the pandemic, encampment removals have increased to record levels, nearly tripling between 2022 and 2024 (from 924 sweeps in 2022 to 2,504 sweeps in 2024), with an average of nearly seven sweeps a day in 2024 (Oron n.d.; Oron, 2024). Since 2022, the UCT has conducted over 5,000 removals of encampments, vehicles, and tents (Oron, 2025). Additional analysis shows that storage is often unavailable: only 7% of residents were able to retrieve their

⁷⁸ The UCT was established in 2022. Prior to this, the Navigation Team, a cross-departmental team liaised between members of SPR and other partner agencies including the Seattle Police Department, Seattle Department of Transportation, and Seattle Public Utilities, to coordinate a response and conduct removals (2017 onwards).

⁷⁹ Once an encampment is removal is complete, this was described by some study interviewees as "resolved."

property after being swept (Oron, 2025). Moreover, the city’s shelter capacity has not kept pace with the increase in removals – recent reports indicate that 95% of Seattle’s shelter beds are occupied, leaving only 5% available each night (*The Seattle Times* journalist Greg Kim, quoted in *The Urbanist*; Wilson, 2025).

Eleven chronically unhoused individuals residing in Seattle were interviewed for this study. All participants were aware of the city’s sweep activities, and eight of them had experienced at least one encampment removal. They reported feeling unsafe during sweeps, noted that protocols, such as warning notices or outreach workers visiting the site, were not being followed, and mentioned that valuable personal items were taken from them. Chapter 10 further discusses their experiences of encampment removals.

Seattle Parks and Recreation’s Responses to Houselessness

SPR’s responses to houselessness are also a mix of supportive and punitive measures. These include providing services to individuals experiencing houselessness, as well as regulating the use of spaces, forcibly removing unhoused populations, and implementing bans on individuals.

Publicly available information on SPR’s specific activities regarding houselessness is limited.⁸⁰ SPR’s strategic priorities for 2020-2032 mention houselessness just once, committing SPR to: “Participate in the City’s efforts to uplift individuals experiencing homelessness through

⁸⁰ Overall, there is a lack of evidence regarding the different responses of U.S. public park agencies to the issue of houselessness. More research is required.

job training and respectful cleaning of encampments” (SPR, 2025b). The literature review for the study identified four key ways SPR responds to the issue:

- Providing safe shelter during emergencies
- Offering access to free showers and hygiene services
- Facilitating access to employment and housing
- Enforcing rules and regulations that restrict or stop the use of spaces.

During the pandemic, then SPR Superintendent Jesús Aguirre, referred to two of the listed responses, shelter and showers, as “mission essential functions” (SPR, 2020a, p. 1).⁸¹ The details of the four responses are further explored below.

Provision of Emergency Shelter

SPR is part of the city’s emergency shelter response, which includes utilizing community center facilities for overnight shelter during extreme weather events or other emergencies (Seattle Office for Emergency Management, 2021). According to Seattle’s Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, the SPR acts as “the lead department for sheltering when the American Red Cross is not available” (Seattle Office for Emergency Management, 2021 pp. 4-3).

During the pandemic, then Mayor Durkin designated four out of SPR’s 25 community centers as emergency shelter sites. This aimed to reduce the number of people in the city’s

⁸¹ Referring to SPR’s role in the Seattle Comprehensive Emergency Plan which defines the strategies and responsibilities of public agencies in Seattle following an emergency event (www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Emergency/PlansOEM/2021%20EMAP%20Updated%20Plans/2021-10-26_CEMPIntroduction.signed2.pdf)

congregate houseless shelters (Taylor-Judd, 2020a). In March and April 2020, SPR's Garfield, Miller, Loyal Heights, and Southwest Teen Life community centers provided 50 beds a night each in partnership with agencies such as Catholic Community Services, YMCA, WHEEL, and Compass Housing Alliance (Taylor-Judd, 2020b). These shelters operated for approximately six months, closing around September 2020 after COVID infection rates dropped (Brownstone, 2020).

It is noteworthy that over one-third of the SPR interviewees in this study were assigned to work at an emergency community center shelter during the pandemic. This highlights the significance of SPR facilities during emergencies and the important and active role their staff play in implementing and managing responses.⁸² The interviewees who worked in the shelters emphasized the critical support these facilities offered to individuals experiencing houselessness. However, they also highlighted the challenges of providing shelter within recreation amenities – many of these challenges are common to ongoing SPR responses to houselessness and are examined in Chapter 8. Most of those involved in the shelters felt out of their depth and unprepared to adequately ensure the safety of diverse groups and reported a lack of appropriate skills and training. The issue of insufficient skills and training is an important theme in this study, and it is further discussed in Chapters 9 and 11. Appendix J provides additional information on the provision of emergency shelters by SPR during the pandemic.

While the use of SPR's community center facilities for overnight shelter is not new, the scale of the pandemic response was unprecedented. It is noteworthy how quickly SPR adapted in

⁸² Seven interviewees worked at a shelter. Six individuals from the Recreation Department who already worked in the community centers designated as shelters, and one individual from the Parks Department.

the early months of the pandemic to modify its services and provide shelter to individuals experiencing houselessness. Post-pandemic, SPR community centers have continued to offer shelter during severe weather to those in need (KCRHA, 2024c). For example, three centers - International District/Chinatown, Rainier Beach, and Northgate – served as daytime cooling facilities during extreme heat in June 2021 (cityweb, 2021). Guidance published in 2023 by the KCRHA outlined policies regarding shelter during extreme weather, listing four community centers (International District/Chinatown, Rainier Beach, Northgate, and Hiawatha) as community cooling spaces (KCRHA, 2023c).

More recently, in November 2024, Garfield Community Center partnered with the Red Cross to provide emergency overnight shelter during the “bomb cyclone” windstorm (Dalgetty, 2024b). Earlier that year, the Ravenna Eckstein Community Center was utilized as an emergency overnight shelter for residents of a 26-unit apartment following a fire (Seattle Parks and Recreation, 2024).

However, these incidents appear to be the only times since the pandemic that the SPR community centers have been used for overnight shelter. The KCRHA’s most recent summary of winter weather activations between November 2024 and March 2025 does not include SPR facilities, suggesting a reduced role for the agency. Other facilities in the city, such as the Fisher Pavilion and the Exhibition Hall at Seattle Center, have been used instead (KCRHA, 2025).

Free Hygiene Services

Since 2016, SPR has provided free shower facilities to residents in Seattle (Hirsch, 2017). A free shower program based at five community centers operates on a first-come, first-served

basis, allowing individuals to shower for 15 to 20-minute time slots.⁸³ Soap and disposable towels are provided at no cost. Additionally, public-school students in Seattle, along with their immediate family, can access showers at the Medgar Evers Pool after school and on weekends by showing student identification. SPR reports that 5,446 individuals used their free shower program in 2024 (SPR, 2024).⁸⁴

Some interviewees noted that the Green Lake Community Center serves as a prominent shower site, frequently utilized by individuals experiencing houselessness, low-income residents, and lake swimmers. The shower facilities at Green Lake are operated by Uplift Northwest, a nonprofit organization that employs individuals who are houseless or living on a low income (Uplift Northwest, n.d.). The staff at Uplift Northwest manage visitor check-ins, monitor usage, and clean the showers. This custodial arrangement allows the community center's staff to focus on programming and front desk duties.

During the Pandemic, four community center shower programs remained open (Taylor-Judd, 2020c).⁸⁵ To support these efforts, in December 2020, SPR organized a toiletry donation drive, requesting items such as soap, shampoo, hand sanitizer, deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, socks, and feminine hygiene products (cityweb, 2020).

In interviews with SPR professionals, many mentioned that the free shower program is an essential service that SPR provides for the houseless and is an example of care for vulnerable

⁸³ Delridge, Green Lake, Meadowbrook, Miller, and Rainier Community Centers. (<https://parkways.seattle.gov/2020/03/16/seattle-parks-and-recreations-free-shower-program-operating-on-modified-schedule-at-5-community-centers/>)

⁸⁴ No published evaluation reports or metrics detailing the participation and usage figures by individuals experiencing houselessness in the shower program were found as part of this study's literature review.

⁸⁵ Delridge, Green Lake, Meadowbrook, and Rainier Community Centers.

individuals. However, some interviewees felt conflicted, recognizing the program's value while noting that it is disconnected from other essential support services, such as laundry facilities. Others mentioned challenges in keeping their facilities safe and sanitary while keeping pace with demand for the service. The relationship between SPR's shower program and care is discussed further in Chapter 9.

Facilitating Access to Employment and Housing

The Seattle Conservation Corps (SCC) is a unique, long-standing SPR program established in 1986. It supports individuals experiencing houselessness by helping them develop skills, access training and employment opportunities, and find permanent housing. The SCC is a member of the Washington State Community Action Partnership, a nonprofit initiative that receives federal funding. This network consists of 30 agencies serving vulnerable residents of King County (Washington State Community Action Partnership, n.d.).⁸⁶

Participants in this study included a representative from the SCC and a SCC program participant, whose experiences are detailed in Appendix K. The SCC interviewee described the program as “really lifting up a population that are on the fringes, they are in the margins.” The SCC works directly with up to 60 participants a year, recruiting them through partnerships with social support organizations such as the Salvation Army and connections with the King County Drug Diversion Court. Most participants are either unhoused or living in temporary shelters (Beekman, 2022).

⁸⁶ The Corps is one of four government entities in the network.

On average, around 70% of participants complete the SCC program, and approximately 80% go on to secure stable housing (Parkways, 2022). Participants sign up for one year and train and work five days a week for 40 hours each. Each individual is assigned a Case Manager, whom they see daily, and can also work with a SCC Job Coach and an Education and Training Coordinator (Allen, 2024). Participants can study for their GED, gain technical and life skills such as money management, job readiness, and emotional regulation. They also have access to support services, including rent assistance and grocery vouchers (Pathways, 2022). Participants work in small crews, and as they gain skills, some have the opportunity to become crew heads.

Since its inception, over 800 people have completed the SCC program (Parkways, 2022). Participants typically find work with other city departments, or in the building and construction trades, or pursue further training via apprenticeships (Beekman, 2022; Parkways, 2022). A major challenge for obtaining employment within city departments is the requirement to pass a criminal background check; the SCC interviewee identified this as a significant barrier for many participants.

The SCC program is unusual for a public park and recreation agency. This study's literature review did not yield information on why the program was established. The SCC interviewee was unaware of its origins, remarking: "Somebody had some foresight around this back in 1986, where perhaps the homelessness crisis, if you will, may not have been as impactful or significant. But somewhere back then someone had the foresight!"

In 2025, the SCC's annual budget was approximately \$6.2 million, reflecting an increase of over \$1 million from the previous year (SPR, 2025a). The SCC interviewee noted:

It's only recently, and it's a good thing, that leadership has the foresight to see that we want the Conservation Corps to be more, to grow, to expand, to be more sustainable. And I think this last three, four years has proven that we put money where our mouth is. They added almost a million dollars of Park District funding to the program (SCC Interviewee, SPR).

The SCC is also income-generating, covering 75% of its costs by performing work for other city departments, primarily environmental improvement projects such as maintaining bioswales for Seattle Public Utilities (Beekman, 2022). While this study's literature review did not find publicly available data on the SCC's work contracts broken down by city department, the SCC interviewee estimated that only about 10% of their work is for SPR, with SPU as the most significant client.

Although the SCC is a unique SPR program, this study's literature review revealed that it was not well promoted by the city. The SCC does not have its own business plan. The SPR Strategic Plan for 2020 – 2032 commits to enhancing economic opportunities in Seattle by doubling the size of the SCC but offers no further details or rationale (SPR, 2020b).

The SCC interviewee commented that the Corps is not well known within SPR. A *Seattle Times* article also refers to it as “flying under the radar” (Beekman, 2022). The participant corroborated this observation but felt that the lack of promotion is intentional to avoid being overwhelmed by demand. More research into the SCC, its impacts, and its potential as a positive example for other public park agencies in addressing houselessness would be very valuable.

Enforcing Rules and Regulations

The City of Seattle has adopted some of the nation's strongest controls on behavior in public spaces (Beckett & Herbert 2010). This section highlights two exclusionary practices in

which SPR plays a direct role: Park Exclusion Orders and the removal of encampments on SPR-managed land (also discussed above).⁸⁷

Park Exclusion Orders were introduced in Seattle in 1997. Police and Park Rangers have the legal authority to issue park trespass warnings or exclusion notices banning individuals from specific parks, park zones, or all city parks, for up to a year, if they determine that those individuals have violated park rules (Seattle.gov, 2025). Exclusion is based on whether a person is believed to be engaging in prohibited activities. These include camping or erecting a tent, being in a park outside operating hours (usually 11:30 pm to 4 am), consuming alcohol or possessing an open container of alcohol, littering, having an unleashed pet, and starting a fire. Violating park rules may also result in parks being temporarily closed. It is a gross misdemeanor to remain in a park after an exclusion notice has been issued. Individuals who ignore this notice and stay in the park may face a fine of up to \$5,000 or imprisonment for up to one year (Seattle.gov, 2025).

Beckett and Herbert (2010) describe Park Exclusion Orders as a social control strategy that banishes certain groups from public spaces. Their analysis, conducted in 2005, revealed that these orders are used disproportionately against people of color (38% of those excluded were Black) and the unhoused (just over 50% of orders issued).⁸⁸ Those who are excluded from parks report feeling unsafe or vulnerable in the new locations they are forced to move to. Furthermore,

⁸⁷ Beckett and Herbert also looked at the use of Stay Out of Drug Area (SODA) and Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution (SOAP) ordinances. Both were signed back into law by Mayor Bruce Harrell in September 2024.

⁸⁸ This research was conducted across four months in 2005.

overturning a Park Exclusion Order is very difficult; Beckett and Herbert noted in their research that only two individuals had successfully appealed their orders (Beckett & Herbert, 2010).

Although Beckett and Herbert's research is now nearly twenty years old, it remains important. The park exclusion policy was revised in 2012 after the Seattle Human Rights Commission wrote to the then Mayor McGinn to highlight the racist use of this policy. In response, the policy was changed to allow individuals to receive a trespass warning before a trespass order is issued. These warnings allow people to return to parks if they do not break the rules again. Under the previous approach, individuals could be immediately excluded and banned from city parks for a single infraction (Councilmember Licata, 2012).⁸⁹

SPR's approach to encampment removal has also evolved over time. Before the establishment of an inter-departmental approach in 2017, which created the Mayor's Unified Care Team's predecessor, the Navigation Team, SPR maintenance staff would clear encampments from SPR land on an as-needed basis. A few of this study's interviewees were involved with this work at that time. They reported that it placed a significant burden on their time and resources and could be dangerous at times (this is further discussed in Chapter 8).

The Encampment and Special Teams Unit (also known as the Special Maintenance Team) within SPR is currently responsible for responding to issues related to houselessness in Seattle's parks. Established in 2018 and expanded in 2023, this team collaborates with the UCT to remove

⁸⁹ There is no recent research on the use or annual numbers issued of Park Exclusion Orders in Seattle. This information is not included in SPR's annual reports.

encampments from parks and SPR-managed spaces, as well as leading on the restoration of these areas following removal (City of Seattle, 2023).⁹⁰

The interviews for this study asked participants how SPR responds to unhoused individuals using their parks for shelter. Some interviewees were hesitant to discuss encampment removals in a professional capacity. However, eight SPR interviewees shared their perspectives on this policy. These participants expressed empathy for those being displaced and voiced feelings of futility regarding the situation. Their concerns primarily centered on the ineffectiveness of removing people who have nowhere else to go, as well as a belief that public resources are not being spent in the best way. Chapter 8 further explores the responses gathered during these interviews.

Summary

Seattle is a beautiful city with many green, open public spaces and a well-regarded public park system that is often recognized as a model for innovation and best practices in park and recreation service delivery. However, the high cost of living in Seattle makes it particularly difficult for individuals with low incomes to maintain stable housing and thrive in the city. People of color are disproportionately affected by Seattle's severe income inequity, making them more likely to struggle with high rents and face a greater risk of displacement.

⁹⁰ The SPR website does not provide detailed information on the Encampment and Special Teams Unit. It was not possible to find out how many people work for the unit. A job posting (2023) seeking maintenance laborers for the unit lists responsibilities including removing: "large debris from encampment sites throughout the City on SOOT, WDOT, SPU, Seattle City Light and Park Properties," suggesting that SPR staff assist other city departments in clearing encampments from their lands (Governmentjobs.com, 2023).

The ongoing shortage of affordable housing in Seattle, alongside poor temporary shelter capacity, are significant factors contributing to the city's high rate of unsheltered houselessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Seattle has been in a State of Emergency for houselessness for a decade, with few signs of improvement. The numerous public and green spaces in the city are valuable assets for its unhoused residents, many of whom depend on SPR amenities to meet basic needs such as access to water and restrooms.

Addressing houselessness is a challenging and complex issue, and the Seattle public organizations discussed in this chapter have struggled to respond. Publicly funded efforts to combat houselessness are extensive, featuring a contradictory mix of innovative policies and punitive, enforcement-led measures. This mix is problematic and can add to the marginalization of unhoused populations. Furthermore, despite placing a strong priority on reducing houselessness in the city, some programs and service providers have underperformed, failing to deliver long-term results. Meanwhile, the city's population of chronically unsheltered individuals has continued to grow.

The policies and programs SPR has implemented in response to houselessness are not well documented. Gathering information for this chapter was sometimes difficult. There are information gaps, including the current role of community centers in providing overnight shelter, evaluations or performance metrics relating to the houseless community using the shower program, data on the use of Park Exclusion Orders by SPR employees, and insights into the role of the Encampment and Special Teams Unit, particularly in relation to the UCT and other city departments. SPR may also be involved in other responses to houselessness that are not widely

publicized. For example, SPR staff in the Concierge Program engage with unhoused individuals as part of their activation efforts in downtown parks, also discussed in Chapter 8.

It is unclear how SPR's responses compare to those of other public park and recreation agencies across the nation. While the Seattle Conservation Corps appears to be unique in its approach - providing employment and assistance connecting individuals to services - restricting the use of public spaces is a more common practice. Further research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the national landscape. Chapter 16 will discuss the evidence gaps identified by this study and highlight areas where more information would be beneficial.

Currently, there is no research examining how Seattle's park and recreation assets are being planned, managed, and delivered in the context of a housing crisis. To address this gap, the following four chapters provide findings from interviews with professionals working in the city and share the experiences of unhoused individuals residing in Seattle. The responses of SPR to individuals experiencing houselessness in their spaces and amenities are explored further in these chapters. Interviewees discussed encampment removals, the provision of emergency shelters in community centers, and the free shower program. Although some mention was made of the KCRHA in relation to reducing houselessness in the city, it was not a significant focus. Occasional references were made to mayoral policies, mostly concerning encampment removal.

The information provided in this chapter helps contextualize the interview findings, especially interviewees' perceptions of SPR's role and responsibilities amid the city's housing emergency and whether offering services to unhoused populations falls within their responsibilities.

Chapter Seven: Managing Public Parks and Recreation Services in Seattle

Introduction

This chapter explores the realities of managing and delivering public park and recreation amenities in Seattle, as described by interviewees from Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR).⁹¹ It provides an overview of the participants' experiences working in parks and recreation in Seattle, including their motivations for joining SPR, their service priorities, and the challenges they encounter.

The goal of interviewing SPR professionals was to gain a better understanding of the management of Seattle's public parks and recreation services. Participants were asked about their roles and responsibilities, the impact of houselessness on their daily work, their organization's responses to unhoused individuals, their perspectives on these responses, and ideas for the future direction of these services, including their personal aspirations. The interviews also covered the concept of care in relation to public parks and recreation services. Subsequent chapters (8 and 9) will specifically explore the delivery of park and recreation services in Seattle in the context of houselessness and their potential future direction, while Chapter 10 focuses on the experiences of individuals experiencing houselessness.

This chapter examines the range of services that SPR provides and the participants' roles as public servants. It explores their efforts to steward Seattle's public parks and offer amenities

⁹¹ Appendix D provides information on the SPR interviewees, including job description and department.

and programs that meet diverse community needs while remaining open to all. It highlights the importance they place on creating welcoming, inclusive environments that treat everyone equally. As well as the personal satisfaction they derive from serving the public and their motivation to make a positive difference to community well-being. Additionally, it examines the pressures SPR staff face in trying to meet the significant expectations of management. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the complex balancing acts interviewees must navigate to keep the public park and recreation spaces they work in safe and accessible for diverse communities.

A Unique Field: “We Do So Much More Than Other Departments”

Public parks and recreation management is unique and multifaceted, comprising a wide range of professions that provide valuable services that positively impact millions of people each day (NRPA, 2023). SPR has extensive responsibilities, including managing and maintaining a physical infrastructure of diverse landscapes, green and open spaces, and recreational amenities. SPR also delivers recreational programming and plans the long-term strategic direction for its spaces and facilities.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to park and recreation management (CABE Space, 2004b). Three interviewees described their parks or community centers as having distinct characters or personalities, shaped by local community aspirations for specific spaces and by the activities of frequent visitors. This variety influences SPR’s choice of services or activities for individual amenities. A park-focused Program Manager emphasized the breadth of their work, stating:

What does the Parks Department do? It mows the grass, it creates events, it creates opportunities for people to do stuff, it runs basketball leagues, it rents out facilities, it builds playgrounds, it plants flowers. We do so much more than other departments just because of the vast variety of our amenities (Program Manager, Parks Department).

Many of the interviewees have a high degree of autonomy in their day-to-day roles. For instance, a park-focused Program Manager referred to himself: “as kind of a community connector for our parks. I have a blank check for mayhem!” The role of a Community Center Manager has a particularly high level of self-determination. It encompasses overseeing the facility, managing operations, budgeting, programming of classes, events, and activities, as well as serving as a liaison between partner agencies and other SPR divisions.

Although the wide range of actions SPR professionals can take is empowering, this level of personal autonomy can sometimes feel isolating or stressful. For instance, one Community Center Manager noted: “I am responsible for pretty much everything that happens in these four walls,” they stated that this level of responsibility can be lonely and may place pressure on individual Managers: “We’re on an island. We are adrift, we are alone. You can take that as a negative; that you don’t have any support. Or you can take it as a positive, you have infinite control. It’s really up to you.” Later sections of this chapter also discuss feelings of inadequate support by leadership, a key theme in this study, also examined in Chapter 11.

Public Servants: “It’s About Making a Difference for People”

Public park and recreation agencies serve the public, with many of the SPR professionals regularly interacting face-to-face with individuals of all ages and life stages. This aspect of their roles was important to the interviewees. It is part of their professional identity, tied to the provision of high-quality services that meet the needs of different communities, and connected to

their ideals for public parks and recreation. The role of park and recreation professionals as public servants is also pertinent to discussions about houselessness, and this is further explored in Chapter 8.

A Planning and Development worker (Parks Department) stated: “To put it bluntly, good park management is that we work for the public. We work for the people. We serve the public.” Six interviewees (two from the Parks Department, four from the Recreation Department) identified themselves as public servants. One Community Center Manager described himself as: “a steward of taxpayers money.” For the recreation interviewees, being available for daily interactions with visitors is a vital part of their roles. One Community Center Manager explained: “We’re one of the few branches of government where you can actually reach someone on the phone. And we’re considered [the] third most essential service after police and fire; I get people that shake my hand and thank me.”

Many interviewees expressed that they entered the park and recreation profession with the ideal of making a difference (this ideal is also discussed in Chapters 8 and 9). Their commitment is demonstrated by their long service records with SPR.⁹² They perceive their role as helping communities to thrive, assisting people, and making a positive impact. An individual working in the SPR Safety Office corroborated this desire to help during an informal conversation. She also stated that, in some cases, SPR professionals have disregarded internal policy to help others. She observed: “most our recreation staff, we find they try to help out too

⁹² 18 interviewees shared how long they have worked for SPR. This totaled 355.5 years of service, an average of approximately 20 years of professional service per person.

much and don't follow procedures." Chapter 9 further discusses the extensive ways some SPR interviewees have tried to assist individuals using their spaces.

Some interviewees described the personal satisfaction they derive from their job. For instance, a park-focused Program Manager shared: "I'm trying to make a difference and try to make a better world one step at a time in small, incremental ways. And this played into that. And so, this qualifies my existence." Similarly, a Community Center Manager highlighted their motivation to help others, saying:

It's not about money. It's about making a difference for people. You know it's about helping people in ways that are as simple as, well, how do I get to this place? You know, just helping people, that's what I'm here for (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Some interviewees described their work as providing a public good, recognizing the extensive value parks and recreation contribute, as discussed in Chapter 2, and the importance of parks and recreation amenities in supporting community well-being. For example, an Operations Manager (Recreation Department) emphasized the important contribution of public parks and recreation for people's quality of life: "The ability to have public park spaces and have places for your children to go play and feel safe is really important for people's peace of mind, for their health, to have a good-quality life. Like, what better?" Additionally, a Community Center Manager described their role as serving as an "intervention" to address community needs and improve well-being. He expressed that public recreation is: "Looking to help people thrive as a community. And it's looking at the systems and relationships and spaces that promote that. We're generalists." They listed the benefits of their work as helping amenity users to develop skills,

participate in sports, access homework assistance, improve fitness, and foster relationships with other members of their community.

Good Service Provision: “We’re Just Always Evolving and Adapting”

The SPR professionals view their stewardship of spaces and amenities as playing a crucial role in ensuring the successful future of public parks. Each SPR interviewee was asked to share their thoughts on what constitutes high-quality service provision in park and recreation management. Their responses varied by specific area of operation, likely due to differences in levels of public interaction and their professional focus, but some interviewees emphasized that public parks and recreation as a field is continuously adapting to meet community needs.

Those working in recreation tended to offer more people-focused examples of high-quality service provision because their roles are predominantly customer-facing. In contrast, park-focused interviewees provided broader responses centered on the maintenance, upkeep, and management of public spaces. Some Park Department interviewees discussed service quality from a long-term strategic perspective, reflecting SPR’s responsibility for ensuring the longevity of public spaces that are key assets for the City of Seattle. For example, an individual involved in park planning and development described high-quality service provision as creating efficient work practices that are flexible and adaptable to new conditions, such as climate change, culture change, environmental change. “We’re just always evolving and adapting,” they stated, emphasizing the need for safe and accessible ways for people to enjoy nature.

Furthermore, another individual in a park support role highlighted the importance of park agencies and their staff in taking a long-term view. She noted that the first parks in Seattle were established about 100 years ago and will be around for many more years. Despite changes over

time to budgets, staffing, and city politics, delivering quality in park design, management, and maintenance has always been essential and will remain so into the future.

Open to All: “That's Your Right as a Person Who Lives in Seattle”

A robust body of literature demonstrates that high-quality parks and recreation systems are inclusive. They prioritize those in need and ensure that everyone, regardless of income or housing status, has access to recreational activities, nature, and public parks (Beck et al., 2024; Rigolon, 2016; Wolch et al., 2014). The interviewees from SPR also emphasized the importance of providing inclusive and accessible spaces and facilities.

This ideal – where everyone, irrespective of their life circumstances, has access to public parks and recreation amenities - was highlighted by many interviewees. For example, an Operations Manager (Recreation Department), with oversight for nine community centers, stated that accessible park and recreation services are tied to the rights of all Seattle’s residents irrespective of housing status: “All of our community centers are open to the public and homeless, whether you have a home, or don't have a home, it shouldn't matter. That's your right as a person who lives in Seattle to utilize our public spaces and our public buildings.” Ensuring facilities are accessible to everyone is a key part of her role in operations, she noted: “I didn’t get into this line of work to be telling people they can’t come, it feels counterintuitive,” adding “we take a lot of pride in [providing accessibility] and trying to welcome everybody.”

A Community Center Manager highlighted the importance of public park and recreation services in promoting equality: “in a public service, we want to treat everyone the same.” However, they qualified this: everyone is treated the same unless a person’s behavior negatively impacts others: “Rather when people act funny, then they get treated differently. But initially, you

know, that's the goal." The section below on balancing acts also discusses the judgment calls SPR staff must make when encountering challenging behavior in their spaces and amenities. Chapter 12 (Freeway Park) explores how one park program navigates these competing priorities to ensure the park is accessible to different groups of people, including those experiencing houselessness.

Some recreation interviewees talked about their important role as a public institution in reducing barriers to access, recognizing that not everyone can afford the fees for recreational programming and amenities. An Operations Manager (Recreation Department) explained that Seattle is divided into different equity zones: "to allow for some centers to charge a little more and support centers that are in high equity communities so they can charge a little bit less." One Community Center Manager working in an affluent area summarized this approach as acting like "Robin Hood," turning their surplus into scholarship funds for centers with greater need.⁹³

For the community center interviewees, providing a high-quality, inclusive service means creating a welcoming environment for everyone who enters the facility. This includes greeting visitors with a smile, recognizing regular patrons, maintaining a safe and inviting space for recreational activities, and offering assistance when needed. Interviewees identified several indicators of success in delivering high-quality services, such as repeat visits or increased foot traffic, seeing familiar faces daily, having programs that are full or frequently requested, and hearing that they have been recommended by others.

⁹³ SPR's Equity Priority Populations Index uses different data indicators to identify the communities most in need of their leisure services (https://arcseattle.org/files/galleries/Equity_Priority_Map.pdf)

A Community Center Manager emphasized that high-quality service provision involves being responsive and intentionally offering a range of programming tailored to the different communities using the facility. He stated: “we’ll nuance that drop-in programming. One area, it might be really beneficial to target the queer community and say: ‘hey, we’re looking for a safe drop-in space that’s queer affirming.’ And so, we’ll have that. In another one, it’s like senior basketball.”

Interviewees from the Parks Department also highlighted the importance of making individuals feel welcome in park spaces. A park-focused Program Manager articulated that the act of welcoming people is inherent to the maintenance of parks and linked to the societal benefits that public parks provide:

When we talk to our frontline people, you ask them, what do you do? “Well, I mow the grass.” Yes, you do. But guess what? You provide a great place people can come, welcoming, it’s clean, the comfort stations are clean. It just serves so many societal benefits (Program Manager, Parks Department).⁹⁴

Other Park Department interviewees noted that creating a welcoming atmosphere can involve activation, such as providing entertainment or music, which draws people into spaces and encourages them to stay. A park-focused Program Manager explained the rationale for activating park spaces in downtown Seattle in terms of “reclaiming” the space: “You bring in a busker and that all immediately transforms and changes the dynamic, the attitude of the park. People come in and they’re instantly able to reclaim it.”

⁹⁴ The importance of providing a welcome to those using spaces and amenities is further explored in Chapter 8 and the case study chapters 12 – 14.

The ideal of being “open to all” may involve efforts to attract diverse communities. For example, one Community Center Manager shared how they recently translated their information leaflets into Amharic to encourage a local low-income community to use their center. She hoped that by providing materials in their language, people would feel more welcome to come in and use facilities or attend programs. Another Community Center Manager stated that “success” is reflected in the diversity of people using the center, saying:

I think if any one group of people at your center is not present, you're just not doing it right. And your goal should be to get these different groups of people to interact, especially different groups of people that wouldn't normally have any interaction. And it starts with getting them in the same building. And then it works towards getting them in the same class (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Some interviewees described their endeavors to draw new visitors into their facilities while also meeting the needs of existing users. An individual who works in Seattle’s Central District, a historically Black neighborhood that is experiencing an influx of new, more affluent non-Black residents, is striving to ensure that their center’s programming reflects local change but retains existing users. They are offering classes requested by the new community while also honoring the long-standing families rooted in the local area. For instance, she recently secured a grant to offer a step class, particularly popular among local Black female residents, free of charge.

Ensuring that a park space or community center embodies the value of being “open to all” entails active management and stewardship, including balancing the needs of different communities using amenities. These balancing acts are discussed further below and in subsequent chapters examining the delivery of park and recreation services in the context of

houselessness. Chapters 12 through 14 on the case studies also explore the active management of parks to ensure they are intentionally inclusive.

Role Diversity: “They Kind of Use Us as Their Swiss Army Knife”

Many public park and recreation professionals possess interdisciplinary knowledge and a diverse set of skills and competencies (Hurd & Anderson, 2015). When asked to describe their daily responsibilities, each interviewee reported a wide range of duties, often involving the management of multiple tasks simultaneously and collaboration with other organizations or SPR departments. However, the participants also expressed frustration about being overextended and not receiving adequate support from leadership to effectively fulfill their job responsibilities.

An interviewee involved in park planning and development summarized his role as: “anything recreation.” His job includes managing over 40 grounds maintenance employees, including park laborers, truck drivers, installation maintenance workers, senior gardeners, and utility laborers. Additionally, he collaborates with community centers and is involved in park events, permitted athletics, and school programs.

A park-focused Program Manager described their role as a “lot of partnership work. A lot of finessing.” Her responsibilities include managing 12 park-focused contracts; selecting and scheduling park staff and performance artists; planning activation events; attending council meetings; managing budgets; ordering event supplies; reporting safety concerns to management; and collaborating with Seattle Police and other partners. Additionally, as discussed above, the community center manager interviewees reported a wide variety of responsibilities essential to the successful operation of their amenity.

The extensive responsibilities associated with park and recreation work can be overwhelming. Some interviewees reported feeling overextended, managing too many tasks, and receiving inadequate support from SPR management. One Community Center Manager expressed feeling exhausted by the demands from upper management: “They kind of use us as their Swiss Army Knife. I’m gonna put my pissed off hat on now. They use us so much, for everything.” He feels he often lacks the support needed to perform his job effectively: “Management has not equipped us a lot of the time to do the thing that we’re trying to do or thrown us into stuff without really providing support. That’s been consistent.”

Another Community Center Manager described directives received from upper management: “It’s just the directive ‘make it happen’ and an assumption that we’re skilled and smart enough to make it happen, with no resources.” This important theme of a “make it happen” mindset is also reflected in Chapter 8 and discussed further in Chapter 11.

Lack of Recognition: “Leadership Seems Somewhat Detached”

Related to the frustrations explored above, some interviewees, particularly those in recreation, expressed that the complexities of their roles alongside the often challenging and sometimes unsafe work environments are frequently unrecognized by SPR leadership. Four out of the seven community center managers reported feeling ignored or deprioritized by SPR’s upper management.

One proposed reason for this disconnect is that their senior managers do not regularly visit the centers and may not fully understand the extent of the daily challenges. One Community Center Manager was feeling weary from raising issues with management, as if he were constantly complaining. Another Community Center Manager asked his supervisor to come visit

his center, explaining: “leadership seems somewhat detached because they’re not at the frontlines.” He invited his supervisor to visit because he wanted them to “see how dysfunctional it was” and to listen to their concerns, “and then it wouldn’t be this panic all the time.” The manager did visit, and as a result, the policies at the community center were changed to align with the staff’s requests.

A few felt that this disconnect intensified during the pandemic when senior members of SPR were not working on the ground in parks and community spaces and were not present in the city’s public spaces during the protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. One Community Center employee remarked, “They all stayed home and telecommuted and then told us that we needed to come in!”

The management and operation of SPR’s free shower program present challenges, which are made worse by disconnects with management. Some of the busy shower sites feel under pressure and unsupported by SPR leadership, with damaging impacts for staff morale and feelings of safety. For example, a Community Center Manager highlighted that their facility’s shower program is well-attended but can become very dirty. As a result, their center has struggled to maintain safe and sanitary conditions. The manager shared that they had sent photos to upper management to illustrate the challenges and request additional resources. He felt frustrated that this support had not been provided and they had been left to cope, stating that SPR management needed to change their mindset, that it is not “okay to just assume we’ll use a litter picker to pick up their bloody towels and clothing and stained underwear. Unreasonable!”

He connected this lack of support to the lack of regular center visits discussed above. He asserted: “the challenge that pervades is management, at some point, once you go out of a center,

you very quickly forget what it's like to be in a center.” He believed this distance, alongside a lack of recognition that staff members are having a hard time, was hindering those working in front-facing positions, saying: “why don't we believe the people who are in there and saying this is what's difficult or hard, or I need this kind of thing.” This example highlights the tension faced by staff working in busy recreation facilities who are dedicated to serving the public yet sometimes lack sufficient support to keep these amenities open, clean, and safe.

Another manager noted that recognition of these issues only seemed to change after a member of management was unfortunately assaulted onsite. She remarked: “it’s funny how when it happens to management then it's real, but they don’t hear us screaming from the top of the mountain.” Chapter 11 further examines this disconnect as an important barrier to effective leadership and support for staff in the context of houselessness.

Balancing Acts: “We Have to Balance Those Different Interests in One Space”

Recreation and park amenities cater to people at all stages and in all circumstances of life. Maintaining harmony among the different groups sharing these spaces can be challenging. A key theme from the interviews highlighted the daily balancing acts that the SPR participants perform to meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve while ensuring that spaces remain accessible to everyone. Sometimes, these balancing acts involve advocating for vulnerable individuals to redress the balance in their favor. At other times, they require restoring order in spaces and amenities by asking certain individuals to leave (also discussed in Chapter 12).

An Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department) gave an example of the competing interests they encounter in one well-used park: “You have forest stewards and athletic field advocates like the two don't really mix very well, and golfers, but, so as a city, we have to balance those different interests in one space.” An Operations Manager (Recreation Department) highlighted the importance of balancing the needs of different user groups while keeping amenities safe: “Caring for everybody, like you're a public building that's open to everyone can cause some dynamics of how to keep everybody safe.”

Some interviewees emphasized the importance of balancing the needs of individual users of amenities with the demands and perspectives of other user groups. For example, during an interview with a Program Manager (Parks Department), which took place in a park, a person arrived with their belongings in a shopping cart and lay down on the grass to rest. The Program Manager commented:

Someone could come up to me right now and be like, ‘hey, there's a guy with a cart in the park. What are you going to do?’ I'm like, he's sitting in the grass, he's lying on the grass, you are more than welcome to lie in the grass as well, my friend.’ Like, I ain't gonna do nothing about that. He’s enjoying my park (Program Manager, Parks Department).

One notable trend is the impact of individuals struggling with poor mental health or experiencing crises in SPR spaces and facilities. Seven out of the eight Community Center interviewees cited the complex challenges that arise when users of their facilities are visibly agitated, requiring staff to make difficult judgment calls. An Operations Manager (Recreation Department) described a man who regularly visits one community center. He is experiencing mental health issues that can lead to agitation, sometimes causing him to swear loudly:

It creates, like, inner conflict like because you are here for everyone, but you also need to keep everyone safe. You can't very well have people dropping F bombs around the preschool and people start feeling unsafe. And then you have a situation where other people will not feel safe coming to their community. So that kind of dynamic can be challenging (Operations Manager, Recreation Department).

With some misgivings regarding whether calling the police is the right choice, the Operations Manager said they needed assistance in dealing with the man: “your heart bleeds for this person who's clearly got some issues going on. And then you call the police on them.” They added, “We always have to be thinking of everybody, and the behavior is against our code of conduct, and people were feeling scared and threatened.”

Seattle’s downtown parks, particularly those near the Chinatown-International District and historic Pioneer Square, have been significantly affected by issues relating to chronic homelessness as well as the city’s opioid crisis. In these areas, balancing the needs of those who rely on these spaces can be particularly challenging. A park-focused Program Manager with deep knowledge about SPR’s Concierge program mentioned the importance of keeping spaces open for all while ensuring safety: “We want the park to be for everybody. It’s not just for people who have homes, like the space is for everybody, and so making it safe and accessible for everyone.”⁹⁵ She added:

But the fentanyl does affect and the drinking group at Hing Hay does affect people’s use of space. So, it's walking that tight line of ensuring that we have activation, and that people have access, and then deciding when it's not safe to no longer do it. There are times when we have closed parks due to safety (Program Manager, Parks Department).

⁹⁵ SPR’s Concierge program is covered separately in Chapter 8. These are the staff that work on-site and activate Seattle’s downtown parks.

The next chapter further discusses balancing acts and the SPR interviewees' frustrations regarding inadequate support from their management and a lack of proper guidance to inform their judgment calls.

Summary

The SPR interviewees are strongly committed to serving Seattle residents. They work in demanding roles to address their communities' needs and to provide high-quality, welcoming, inclusive, and accessible parks and recreation amenities. They understand their vital role as public servants in enhancing the well-being and quality of life for individuals who use their spaces. Furthermore, they are intentionally developing and improving their services in response to local needs, designing programs and spaces that are open to all.

However, fulfilling these aspirations for park and recreation services can be challenging. The interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed and under-supported, as they are expected to deliver across multiple areas simultaneously. They perceive SPR's senior leadership as disconnected from the realities of delivering services. Many individuals reported engaging in complex balancing acts to keep their spaces open to all while ensuring they remain safe and pleasant.

The findings in this chapter establish a foundation for understanding the context of working in Seattle's public recreation centers and parks. The next chapter will focus on the delivery of park and recreation services amid high levels of unsheltered homelessness. It will further explore the judgment calls and balancing acts undertaken by SPR staff, as well as the challenges of providing multiple services to a diverse range of groups in the community in the context of rising homelessness.

Chapter Eight: Public Parks and Recreation Amid Houselessness - Role, Responsibilities, and Challenges

Introduction

While the previous chapter discussed the experiences of Seattle Park and Recreation (SPR) employees in delivering public park and recreation services, this chapter examines the impact of Seattle's high levels of unsheltered houselessness on their work and the interviewees' perceptions of their role in this context. This includes their responsibility as public servants to respond to houselessness while also working to provide high-quality, well-maintained parks and amenities that are open and accessible to all. The chapter explores the significant challenges associated with houselessness in Seattle's public parks and the impact of this crisis on the SPR interviewees' daily professional life and personal well-being.

The SPR interviewees shared their perceptions of those living unhoused who use parks and whom they regularly encounter, and the impacts of unhoused individuals using SPR amenities. There is an evident heavy emotional toll on the interviewees, and they shared a range of reactions related to houselessness and its impact on their work, including distress, futility, frustration, compassion, and empathy. The interviewees were asked how they respond to individuals who use parks and recreation amenities for shelter and survival. Many were responding in caring ways, but they emphasized the difficulties they face in meeting people's needs, delivering services, and managing these spaces in this context.

Most participants were open and candid about their experiences; however, a few were more guarded, aware of the politically contentious nature of some SPR responses, expressing

concern about the need to consult their manager before answering certain questions. This became particularly evident when discussing the City of Seattle’s policy on encampment removals which forcibly removes individuals experiencing houselessness and their belongings from park spaces. Interviewees were sometimes hesitant to share their opinions as public employees in case they contradicted SPR’s public stance on this policy. The interviews were guided by the interviewees’ preferences, and any questions that made them uncomfortable were skipped.

The sections below highlight the interviewees’ conflicted feelings about their responsibilities and the challenges of working in an environment lacking clear guidance, support, and training from SPR regarding houselessness. One month into the interviewing process (October 2023), a question was added asking participants whether public park and recreation agencies have a role to play in addressing issues arising from houselessness. Fifteen out of 24 SPR interviewees were asked this additional question.⁹⁶ The majority believe that it is indeed within their scope as park and recreation professionals to respond to houselessness, given that they are public officials delivering a publicly funded service. Their perspectives on their role, including the potential for the profession to take on a greater role regarding houselessness, are discussed below and in the concluding section of this chapter.

A Significant Issue: “A Big Deal for Everybody”

The interviewees uniformly recognized that rising houselessness is a significant issue in Seattle, and they expressed a range of feelings about it. Many described a sense of powerlessness in addressing this problem, but some noted that houselessness is not a new issue; it has

⁹⁶ Chapter 5 (Methods) explains the rationale for the addition of the question.

consistently been part of their professional lives in the city. For example, a Community Center Manager with over 30 years of professional experience noted she has frequently encountered people in crisis at her facility and anticipates this trend will continue as Seattle's population continues to grow.

The interviewees highlighted that the causes of houselessness in Seattle go beyond the scope of SPR, and the effects of the city's housing crisis are a significant concern for all. For instance, a Program Manager (Parks Department) noted:

The reason why we're here. It's not because of the Parks Department. We're here because of an affordability crisis. We're here because of a drug crisis. We're here because of a lot of things that have nothing to do with a park (Program Manager, Parks Department).

Some interviewees expressed concern that the complexities surrounding houselessness have intensified due to the recent opioid crisis, particularly the rise of fentanyl addiction, which presents no easy or straightforward solutions. Another Program Manager (Parks Department) stated: "I think the increasing [numbers of] homeless is a big deal for everybody, not just for parks. It's a whole animal on its own. It's just exploding."

Other interviewees were unsure if there is a solution to houselessness in the City of Seattle, and what their role is in this context. A Maintenance Worker (Parks Department) commented that he feels a sense of futility regarding houselessness:

Jesus said that the poor will always be among us. So yes, there's always going to be unsheltered individuals. There is [not] going to be a one-fix answer. We're never going to end homelessness. I don't know what's considered a winning environment (Maintenance Worker, Parks Department).

The SPR participants' feelings of futility and uncertainty about their roles are further examined in a later section of this chapter.

Role: “We’re Here as Public Servants to Do What the City Needs”

Most interviewees from SPR disagreed with the viewpoint that it is outside the role of park agencies to provide support to individuals experiencing houselessness.⁹⁷ They believe they have a responsibility to respond because they are public officials delivering a public service for all groups in society (also discussed in chapter 7). Furthermore, they stated that the field of public parks and recreation has a long-standing history of supporting vulnerable populations and continues to play a contemporary role in meeting community needs (explored in Chapter 6). However, serving the public is more complex in the context of houselessness. The perspectives of the interviewees in this section contrast sharply with SPR’s 2025-2028 Strategic Plan, which states that the agency’s responsibilities regarding houselessness are to uplift individuals experiencing houselessness through job training and “respectful” participation in encampment sweeps led by the Mayor’s Unified Care Team (SPR, 2025b, p. 13). The interviewees in this study offered a broader vision for their roles.

An Operations Manager (Recreation Department) explained his perspective by stating: “I think we’re here as public servants to do what the city needs of us.” By this, he meant it is within SPR’s responsibility as a public agency to utilize its resources to respond to community needs. An Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department) emphasized the profession’s history in

⁹⁷ Seven people said it is the role of SPR to respond to houselessness. Five people had a mix of positive and negative thoughts. Two people said it is not the role of SPR. One person did not know.

assisting vulnerable populations, saying: “Recreation has provided services, you know shower services, cold weather shelters, that kind of thing for years. So, I feel like Parks has had a role for a long time.”

However, two interviewees asserted that public park and recreation agencies should not focus specifically on supporting individuals experiencing houselessness. One, a retired park professional, acknowledged that while the field of public parks and recreation has the potential to do more, it should not because it is not the agency’s responsibility. They stated: “We’re providing happiness in the business of parks and recreation, we have the opportunity to reach everyone, but we can’t be responsible for everyone.”

The second interviewee, a worker in Planning and Development (Parks Department), expressed empathy for those who are unhoused, but also believed it was not within their responsibilities, as SPR’s primary role is to steward the landscape. They said: “We’re the stewards of that land, and we have an obligation to keep them safe and healthy. And I don’t think parks are the answer for the homeless crisis.”⁹⁸ This is an important distinction – other interviewees also stated they feel torn between their role in caring for park landscapes and their duties toward the individuals using these spaces, especially if this use results in damage to the park and its infrastructure. The potential conflicts between caring for the human and non-human worlds are further elaborated later in this chapter.

Responses regarding whether public park and recreation agencies can be considered providers of social services, defined in this study as services that help meet the needs of

⁹⁸ Landscape stewardship and its implications for people-focused approaches in parks and recreation management is also discussed in Chapter 4.

vulnerable individuals, varied widely. Participants' perceptions of this issue influenced their views on the extent to which the field of public parks and recreation should play a greater role in supporting individuals experiencing houselessness (also explored in the next section).

Some interviewees were confident that park and recreation agencies already function as a social service. A Program Manager (Parks Department) stated that all services delivered by SPR support the public and function as a social service. He explained: “whether it’s the infrastructure, the actual assets, or whether it’s the programming, it really does provide a social service for the public all around.” He referenced research from the Trust for Public Land that evidences the social and economic benefits of parks and public spaces, asserting that “every day we come to do our work it serves a greater good.”⁹⁹

Additionally, a Recreation Manager noted that a significant part of their role as a recreation professional is to help people, stating: “we are social workers without being social workers, it’s not necessarily in our job title but it’s a part of what we do.” This observation highlights the magnitude of the challenges and the ambiguous context in which the interviewees operate, whereby they respond to the needs of those experiencing houselessness without clear guidance or support, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In contrast, some interviewees argued that because public parks and recreation amenities benefit everyone, regardless of housing status or income, they should not be considered social services. For instance, free showers are often used by those who want to avoid using hot water at

⁹⁹ For example, Trust for Public Land and HR&A. (2024). *Parks investment and economic vitality*. TPL www.tpl.org/parks-and-economic-vitality-report and Trust for Public Land. (2024). *The power of parks to strengthen community: A special report*. TPL www.tpl.org/parks-strengthen-community-report

home, or by individuals whose homes are undergoing renovations. Many people visit community buildings to warm up or charge their phones, while restrooms in parks are beneficial for everyone. A Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) was hesitant to focus on specific subpopulations, such as individuals experiencing houselessness. She stated: “I agree that we’re not here as a social service agency, we are here as a place where anyone can come recreate and get out of the hot or the cold.” She added that, as a recreation professional, her role involves recognizing and meeting needs, but she does not want to emphasize this aspect too heavily:

I think there’s space for us to recognize when there’s something that could be a benefit to the community, and look at how we can fill that need, without us being the social workers to do it. I don’t want to be a social worker in this job. I want to run programs
(Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Additionally, other interviewees expressed concern that labeling their work as a social service might distract them from their broader role in providing services for all or have negative consequences for the other groups they serve. This concern is an important theme in the research, and it is also discussed in the previous chapter regarding the interviewees’ fears of attracting too many people experiencing houselessness to their amenities and raising hopes of services they are unable to meet.

In contrast to the interviewee (above) who was reluctant to cater to subpopulations, several participants stated that SPR has a history of providing programs tailored to specific vulnerable groups, often in collaboration with other city organizations. For instance, they mentioned a program at the Garfield Community Center, run in partnership with the Vietnamese Senior Association, which offers seniors social and fitness activities along with meals. Weekly,

participants receive a bag of groceries from a food bank.¹⁰⁰ Other examples include the Seattle Conservation Corps (Chapter 6), a SPR program serving individuals experiencing homelessness.

The tension between the reluctance to focus solely on vulnerable populations and the reality that park agencies already provide programs for specific sub-populations is further discussed in Chapter 11. A summary table of SPR programs for specific groups is provided in Appendix M.

Suspicion: “Not Technically Homeless”

Individuals experiencing homelessness are a heavily stigmatized and marginalized population (Mitchell, 2003; Roy, 2003). Although most of the SPR interviewees recognized the role of public park and recreation professionals in responding to homelessness, some participants questioned whether the individuals they see in their spaces and amenities, who appear homeless, are genuinely without housing or resources, sometimes suspecting them of engaging in questionable or nefarious activities. Their comments dehumanized people experiencing homelessness, implying that they were inferior and lacking in mental capacity. However, many of the participants quoted in this section also went on to express compassion and empathy for unhoused individuals at other points during our interview, reflecting their conflicted and contradictory feelings in relation to homelessness.

An Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department) suggested that some individuals might claim to be homeless to access social services available in Seattle. Others proposed that

¹⁰⁰ There are other senior lunch programs that include cultural activities located in SPR community centers: <https://acrs.org/services/aging-services-for-older-adults/senior-lunch-programs/>

some individuals might simply prefer living in the city's public and green spaces rather than in a house. One Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) likened the houseless to: "modern nomads. I don't want a house; I just want to kind of want to drift."

An individual responsible for park enforcement and security (Parks Department) believed that many people he encounters in Seattle's public spaces are: "not technically homeless." He speculated that instead they might be engaged in criminal activities, particularly the sale of illicit drugs, attributing this behavior to a permissive city culture and a lack of intervention from Seattle leaders. He commented: "Yes, there are people that are homeless and are struggling. But I think that's the minority." Instead, he stated: "It's the folks that are using homelessness as an excuse to do whatever they want to do on the street during this lawless period, because they know they can get away with it."

Several interviewees described individuals experiencing houselessness as if they possess lesser mental capabilities or are unable to live independently or make rational decisions. The Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department) quoted above speculated that some unhoused individuals might not realize that their lifestyle is more difficult than a "normal" life and that it would be easier to live: "life the way it should be and being responsible for paying your bills. That's an easier, softer way." A maintenance worker (Parks Department) speculated that some unhoused individuals may be incapable of taking care of themselves, suggesting this might justify intervention from the public authorities. He asked: "How do we get out of passiveness when it comes to common sense? If we know this person is incapable of taking care of themselves, why are they sat outside here, just roaming around?"

Some interviewees were confused by what they perceive as a resistance to accept services. A Planning and Development (Parks Department) participant remarked:

It's just odd to me that generally a lot of times I do see people that don't want housing or don't want resources. I don't know if that's just like a fear that they don't want authority coming to talk to them (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

Other interviewees also shared incidents in which they described individuals experiencing houselessness negatively, characterizing them as troublemakers exhibiting undesirable behaviors, such as being belligerent or combative, or dirty, living in squalid conditions. A Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) recounted an example involving an unhoused individual who frequently used the facility. One day, the manager found her sleeping on a yoga mat in a corner, in violation of the center's rules. He woke her up, and upon awakening, she claimed she was working out rather than sleeping. Their conversation escalated, and the manager asked her to leave, even calling 911, despite knowing that the police would likely not respond promptly.

The manager believed that communication between them had broken down because the unhoused individual did not respect authority and was unwilling to cooperate or follow the rules. He did not acknowledge that she might be exhausted and distressed, or that she had nowhere else to go.

Compassion: “These Are People Too”

In contrast to the concerns above, many SPR interviewees (including some of the participants quoted in the previous section) expressed more positive or compassionate views of people experiencing houselessness and recognized their shared humanity. They spoke of

instances where they developed rapport with those using their spaces for shelter, becoming emotionally invested in these individuals and concerned for their well-being. As a result, some SPR participants would go beyond their professional duties to try and assist individuals, recognizing they might be able to help, demonstrating their commitment to making a positive difference. However, these caring actions sometimes led to tension with other park users and were at the discretion of the SPR staff members. Further discussion of such responses is also provided in the section below on taking action.

An interviewee involved in planning and development (Parks Department) shared:

I have dealt with a lot of people living in our parks. A lot. And it's just like what I said earlier is, these are people too, they have feelings, they have emotions, they are good. They want to do good (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

He referred to SPR's "Dancing til Dusk" SPR summer events held in Cal Anderson Park, which offer free dance lessons to participants. This park is heavily used by people experiencing houselessness, which can create tension with other local community members. He noted that he observed some people experiencing houselessness trying to stay out of the way during the event setup and others actively participating in the dance lessons, enjoying the experience: "We had some of the people living in the park come up and learning the dancing." He believed this event had a positive impact because it fosters relaxation and interaction among the different groups using the park.

Other interviewees discussed how they became familiar with the unhoused individuals who relied on their spaces and amenities, forming attachments, developing friendships, or emotional connection. For example, another interviewee in planning and development (Parks

Department) frequently encountered a person in Mineral Springs Park, in the Northgate area of Seattle, who struggled with drug addiction and had a problem with hoarding, often bringing numerous items into the park. Although the interviewee felt some resentment for having to clean up after this hoarding activity, he developed a warm relationship with that unhoused park user.

However, the interviewee reported that other regular visitors to the park were dissatisfied with the messiness created by the hoarding, which led to tension. The interviewee often heard negative comments from others in the park. One day, as he was leaving to buy the unhoused individual a coffee, he was distressed to be: “yelled at by a citizen who’s like: ‘you buy him coffee; you’re just enabling them.’”

He explained that the unhoused individual often discussed his hopes of leaving the park. One day: “he got cleaned up, left, and it was for two weeks, and he came by the office clean cut, dressed in nice clothes, and it was just so rewarding.” Unfortunately, however:

Two weeks later we go back to the park. And there he is again. In dirtier clothes, maybe smelling like he hasn't showered in a day. And he's back to it again. And it just eats at you because you root for these people, and you want them to get better (Planning and Development, Park Department).

Other interviewees also described developing friendly relationships with individuals experiencing houselessness frequenting their facilities or spaces. Sometimes, however, the person would stop visiting, leaving the interviewee uncertain whether this meant they had found housing, experienced a decline in health, or moved to another location. This worried the SPR interviewees, with some still feeling anxious outside of work hours. This is discussed further below.

The Weight of Responsibility: “Really Eats Mentally at People”

Some interview participants became emotional while discussing their experiences regarding the impact of houselessness on their work and their feelings of concern for the unhoused individuals they encounter in their spaces. Others acknowledged the weight of responsibility they felt regarding the cumulative and attritional negative impacts associated with houselessness on their spaces and amenities.

For example, an interviewee working in planning and development (Parks Department) described the daily challenges faced by the grounds maintenance staff he manages who must clean up spaces used by individuals for shelter. He stated: “you come here and every day, there's a little pile of burnt wood, you had to pick up broken glass, maybe some syringes, and stuff.” He believes this demoralizes his team, adding:

I just feel like that really eats mentally at people, especially when you're in it every single day. You can't get to other things because you're spending an hour picking this up every day. And it's just not great, it's almost like Groundhog's Day (Planning and Development, Park Department).

As a result, the interviewee noted that some grounds staff have become discouraged from putting effort into improving parks impacted by houselessness: “You want to make a certain area, an upgrade or beautiful, or redo a landscape. It'll prevent your mind from doing that. Because you're like, ‘well, it's just gonna get ruined, or it has a chance of being ruined.’” The interviewee shared that he had started to feel anxious each morning, anticipating a call from his maintenance team to say they had found someone sleeping in the park, but also feeling torn because he feels empathy for individuals using the space for their shelter: “It becomes a weight on you because

you want to produce and execute for the community. But at the same time, you have empathy for this [unhoused] person.”

Public park and recreation professionals are driven by a desire to help, as discussed in Chapter 7, and it is evident in the culture of their field, including within SPR. However, some interviewees expressed the negative effects of feeling uncertain about how best to respond to issues related to houselessness in their facilities and spaces. They reported not having received guidance from SPR management on this important topic (a significant issue that is further examined below). Operating within this culture of mixed signals adds to the burden of responsibility experienced by the SPR interviewees.

The community center interviewees (Recreation Department) were especially vocal about the emotional toll they experience and how these challenges “eat away” at them. These interviewees reported facing additional issues in their centers that compound the pressures they experienced. For example, several community center interviewees spoke of gun violence, theft, criminal damage, and violence between gangs or local youths. Several interviewees expressed frustration, wanting to help but feeling unable to respond meaningfully to the unhoused individuals they encountered. A Community Center Manager commented: “all I can do is offer them a band aid.” Another Community Center Manager expressed: “it doesn’t feel like we’re actually providing help. So, it emotionally takes a toll to work really hard at something and see it fail.” He also observed that other staff members are struggling, with some experiencing isolation, lack of support, and loss of control. Several colleagues have taken a leave of absence due to stress.

A Community Center Manager who regularly sees people in distress at his center stated: “we’re really struggling with the unhoused population. But we have no means of dealing with it. We have no idea how to.” He felt exhausted and could not think of proactive solutions, coping instead with a “get through the week mindset.” This contrasts with what an interviewee mentioned earlier, stating that unhoused individuals have always been a part of their work. This suggests some centers and individual workers feel the impacts of the housing crisis more acutely. It also raises questions about why the SPR interviewees continue to feel unsupported, considering that the city of Seattle declared its housing emergency over a decade ago, in 2015. Chapter 16 discusses the value of providing care for those working in the context of houselessness, a valuable component of sustainable place-based care approaches.

Unsupported and Ill-Equipped: “None of Us Are Social Workers”

The challenges relating to houselessness have significantly altered some interviewees’ jobs, leaving them feeling ill-equipped to perform their roles effectively. In their reflections, some interviewees noted that many parks and recreation professionals lack a background in social services or familiarity with outreach services for the unhoused. This experience is not part of their job descriptions, standard skills required for their positions, or training received after starting the role. Only a few had been trained in de-escalation techniques.

One Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) described his colleagues as “laypeople.” He said:

There’s a lot of people in here that don’t have any college training. There’s a lot of people in here that their college degree was in physiotherapy or sports organization, or you know. None of us are social workers. Not one of us (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

A different Community Center Manager shared: “when I started, we were really focused on recreation.” At that time, his primary responsibility was to design recreation programs. However, in recent years, he explained, “we’re branching out into, like, more social services.” This focus began to shift and broaden during the pandemic, as discussed in Chapter 6 (and Appendix J), when recreation centers started hosting emergency shelters in their facilities for longer periods than before. The provision of shelter also coincided with the suspension of their recreation programming. He commented on this time: “That was the Seattle Parks and Recs first foray into ‘hey you guys are social services now!’ And it’s been a learning process and a growing process, it hasn’t been comfortable, and it hasn’t been easy.”

Among all the SPR interviewees, the Community Center Managers expressed the highest concern regarding the need for improved training and skills development, likely due to their public-facing roles. One manager commented that houselessness means: “we’re maybe dealing with folks that need maybe some different skills sets to work with.” He noted that the lack of skills or training is not unique to public parks and recreation, saying: “I mean you look at the Police and they’re under trained.”

Another Community Center Manager emphasized the importance of training in resources for the unhoused community and called for more professional skills development in de-escalation techniques: “We really ought to have better training on, and resources for, who to contact or do something. Not even just do something about it, but how we as staff can, and should, respond.” They added: “De-escalation training isn’t even a requirement for us as staff. I’ve been to one de-escalation training as a staff person with Parks and Rec. Whereas it was a yearly training when I was at a nonprofit.”

A Program Manager (Parks Department) noted that some colleagues work in a broad range of roles and had, out of necessity, developed basic skills over time:

I know some of our guys are truck drivers and our park guys, they don't know how to connect someone to housing, but they've been out in the field for so long that they know how to interact with some folks (Program Manager, Parks Department).

Other interviewees also commented that they had proactively adapted their working practices in response to issues relating to houselessness. For example, during the winterization of park bathrooms, workers no longer place porta-potties next to the restrooms because of past incidents in which they were used as shelters and caught fire, spreading to the building. Many Community Center Managers reported that they have begun stocking the Emerald City Resource Guide, a resource guide listing services for people experiencing houselessness, to provide to anyone seeking assistance (Real Change, 2025). In the absence of established protocols or procedures for assistance, some front desk staff at community centers resort to Googling sources of help. This lack of guidance for SPR staff is also further examined below.

Finding External Specialist Support: “It’s Hard to Know Who to Call”

Related to the feelings of being ill-equipped, discussed above, a common challenge reported by interviewees was uncertainty about which external social support organizations to approach when people experiencing houselessness used their spaces and facilities to seek assistance. Most of the SPR interviewees have not received training or information about houselessness and available services, and as a result, they struggled in their interactions with individuals asking for help. This lack of knowledge places significant constraints on their ability to assist or access support for people.

People described conducting their own research into the best organizations to reach out to. The SPR professionals working in customer-facing roles, such as Park Concierges or staff at community centers, frequently encounter individuals seeking assistance. Community center interviewees described responding to inquiries on a case-by-case basis. One Manager explained that their staff had, on their own initiative, compiled a list of important contact numbers, which they now keep behind the front desk. The Park Concierges mentioned that they carry the Emerald City Resource Guide or have spare copies available in their kiosks. While some Concierges had contacts for outreach workers they knew personally or had met during previous employment, others did not; one Concierge commented: “it’s hard to know who to call.”

A significant challenge in accessing support for houseless populations is navigating the local landscape of available care, which is often complex and fragmented, and knowing the best organizations with available resources and capacity to help. The difficulty of easily reaching social support providers or outreach workers was a common issue reported by interviewees working in Seattle (also in Appendix L) and in the three case study areas, highlighting broader challenges in sustaining supportive provision for houseless individuals. Chapter 16 further discusses this.

Due to the high turnover rate among staff at Seattle’s outreach organizations, interviewees reported that even if they knew someone who had previously helped them, they often found that, when they called, their contact person had left. Additionally, when they called the organizations listed in the Emerald City Resource Guide, sometimes no one answered.

The challenges experienced by SPR staff when outreach support is not available were illustrated well by a Park Concierge who shared her experience of attempting to assist a young

woman who entered the park one morning disoriented, who was using only a blanket to cover herself. The Concierge approached, asking if she was okay and if there was a Case Manager she could contact. The girl replied that she did not have one but was open to receiving help. The Concierge consulted the Emerald City Resource Guide and called the youth services number several times, but no one answered. She also called the non-emergency 911 number, only to be told that help could not be sent to the park.

Eventually, she reached an outreach worker who instructed the girl to leave the park and travel to his office. Feeling defeated, the Concierge recognized that the girl did not have the capacity to navigate across town on her own. Hoping to find assistance before her shift ended at 6 pm, she unfortunately finished her day without finding anyone to come to the park. The Concierge was distressed; she remarked: “this job breaks my heart.” In the end, she made sure to keep an eye on the girl as she slept in the park, knowing the girl might need to stay awake all night.

The SPR interviewees expressed a desire for a better alternative to requesting a wellness check or assistance through 911. For example, one Community Center Manager stated: “the fire department comes out with a siren screaming.” Two center managers explained they are mindful of the potential negative consequences of calling the police to respond to unhoused individuals in crisis. Both indicated that if issues arise at their facility, they try to avoid involving the Police. One manager commented: “if we’re calling the police, it’s something pretty bad.” The other manager shared: “we don’t want to call the police because that can lead to negative encounters.”

The examples above illustrate the challenges of accessing support for individuals experiencing crisis in public spaces and the value of seeking alternatives to police-led

intervention. **Section III** (Chapters 12 - 14) provides case study examples of place-based care approaches for individuals experiencing homelessness that avoid engagement with enforcement agencies and offer situated care and support in park spaces.

Reconsidering the Profession: “This Isn’t What I Signed Up For”

An important issue arising from the interviews was that some SPR employees had not expected their jobs to include interactions with unhoused individuals or activities relating to the impact of homelessness. This gap between their professional expectations and reality is prompting them to reconsider their future as park or recreation professionals, with some interviewees feeling stressed or anxious about their work. Others wanted clearer guidance from senior management to clarify their responsibilities going forward.

The Maintenance Worker (Parks Department) commented: “what I wanted to do was work with parks. So, the homeless aspect of it is not something I want to deal with.” Similarly, an individual responsible for enforcement and security (Parks Department) shared: “I’m questioning myself. Like this isn’t what I signed up for. This isn’t what I had thought that a park and recreation professional would be doing. I feel more in law enforcement versus in parks and recreation.” This interviewee also noted that some Park Ranger staff are reconsidering their commitment:

Some of them are questioning “do I really want to be a Park Ranger?” They thought it was gonna be a fun job. And now they’re like, “oh my God, a, more like a fire command slash police officer all in one” (Enforcement and Security, Parks Department).

A Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) noted: “It’s a funny, like, head scratcher where someone was just like, I’m a rec professional, I’m spending hours cleaning up

needles. I'm not sure what's happening in my job right now." While he did not think it was wrong to pivot to meet needs, he wanted greater transparency about the new responsibilities staff would be expected to assume. Chapter 9 further discusses how public park and recreation agencies could work differently to meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.

A Planning and Development professional (Parks Department) distinguished between the vocation of delivering public parks and recreation services and the social issues that can arise when unhoused individuals use these amenities:

A lot of people don't get into this line of work to have to deal with things like mental illness, social work, and they are here to provide grounds maintenance, provide a safe, enjoyable space in nature, and do outside work (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

Managers reported feeling burdened asking their staff to engage with unhoused populations or take on additional responsibilities. A Program Manager (Parks Department) stated:

That's not what they want to do. They want to be a horticulturist; they want to run sports leagues. That's what you joined the Parks Department to do. If they wanted to do those things to begin with, they would have gone to HSD, they would have gone to the nonprofit sector and other things like that (Program Manager, Parks Department).¹⁰¹

For example, a Community Center Manager said that he was regularly asking his staff to assume responsibilities beyond their official roles. He stated that his center's shower program is used by some individuals (he identified as homeless) with poor hygiene practices. Sometimes the center staff need to remove human waste from the showers. He feels guilty asking them to clean

¹⁰¹ HSD is the City of Seattle's Human Services Department www.seattle.gov/human-services

and frequently helps, explaining: “I told staff: ‘well I know you went to college so you wouldn’t have to do this, so we’ll take turns because so did I and here we are.’”

These dilemmas relating to the mismatch between people’s expectations, and the reality of working in areas with significant unsheltered populations, challenge SPR’s ability to retain staff and provide high-quality park and recreation services. Many of the interviewees in this study were open to the idea of adapting their role and responsibilities in response to the houselessness (also discussed below). However, it is unclear if there is an appetite among public park and recreation professionals more generally to develop the skills and knowledge needed to assist people experiencing houselessness. As some interviewees stated, people may not want to interact with unhoused individuals or feel uncomfortable doing so. A Community Center Manager asked: “And then what do you do? Do you fire them? Do you hire someone new? How do you handle that?” This could also create challenges for future park and recreation services. Some interviewees were also concerned about the impact of houselessness on SPR’s ability to recruit new individuals.

Further, it is not clear if SPR itself has the appetite to develop responses to houselessness. One Community Center Manager shared an example of encountering obstacles from SPR management while attempting to address the needs of unhoused individuals frequenting their center. During the pandemic, the facility remained closed, except for its shower program, which was heavily used by people living in an encampment in the adjacent park. The interviewee would often speak with individuals who came in to use the showers and eventually met an outreach worker who served as a case manager for some of the individuals living in the park. During their conversation, the manager realized that it would benefit the outreach worker to meet their clients

at the community center. This seemed feasible because they had the space available while other services were closed. She reasoned: “They’re coming into the building, they’re asking us these questions, you could have incredible inter-departmental partnership and starting to address these wraparound services.”

The Manager approached upper management with her idea to build cross-agency co-operation: “all the way higher up was a no, no, no, no, no and I kept pushing and pushing until I finally got a yes!” However, by the time she secured the go-ahead, the city had removed the encampment, and its residents had left the area. She expressed her frustration, saying:

This was frustrating, when a solution is identified, especially from the people who are living and experiencing it in the worst ways, there is hesitancy or even opposition to allow that to happen, because it’s not what we normally do. But they keep asking us for innovative thinking – we brought one to you! (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

The same manager also shared that she had worked with a colleague who has a master’s degree in social work. However, she expressed frustration that their expertise was not utilized by SPR: “they come in with such an incredible knowledge and that is squandered.” She felt that SPR management was not actively looking to these individuals to help shape its responses to the impact of houselessness on their services. The future direction of public park and recreation services in the context of houselessness is also explored in the next chapter, and Chapter 16 examines questions about the appetite of agencies to adopt different ways of working.

Taking Action: “We Can’t Ignore This Because It’s Not Going Away”

While some interviewees said they were reconsidering their futures in parks and recreation, others shared instances in which they felt it was essential to try and help individuals

in crisis using their spaces or facilities. These interviewees went beyond their official job responsibilities or disregarded internal SPR procedures to assist or address urgent needs. Despite lacking necessary skills or training, they felt ethically compelled to intervene in crises, believing it was the right thing to do. The interviewees provided examples of situations where they stepped in spontaneously, reacting on the spot. However, this has important implications for their safety, and the well-being of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Interviewees reported difficulty maintaining detachment from issues related to homelessness recognizing their shared humanity. One Program Manager (Parks Department) said it is inevitable she tries to help because: “I’m a human being.” Yet in contrast, some of the interviewees had been explicitly told by their managers to avoid engaging with individuals experiencing homelessness. For example, a Park Concierge (Parks Department) stated that they had been instructed not to engage with individuals in crisis, but rather to “inform” the police. This was further confirmed by a Program Manager (Parks Department) responsible for park activation, who explained that the concierge’s role is to: “educate, inform, and report.” Nevertheless, for this Concierge, stepping back during a crisis is often not feasible or ethical: “It’s sometimes hard not to get involved.”

A Program Manager (Parks Department) also agreed on the impossibility of standing back, stating while their management had advised: “Oh, don't engage, don't do these things,” they found this perspective ethically inconceivable:

Well, you know, what, are you going to stand there and watch someone overdose from fentanyl when you've got Narcan in your pocket? Once someone's having a critical moment, and you've got information to give them housing, you're not going to give it to him? No. We're going to. We're going to make a difference when we safely can (Program Manager, Parks Department).

This determination to act stems from the motivation of many park and recreation professionals to assist, as well as their high level of autonomy, as previously discussed. For instance, a Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) overseeing a facility with a free shower program explained that they often use chemicals to keep the showers operational. According to the center's official SPR procedure, if a shower is blocked or becomes very dirty during the day, it should be closed. However, the Manager explained that if people are waiting to use the shower: "We're gonna clean it. We're not trained to do it. The onus is on me. If I'm gonna break rules, I'll take it. I don't think anyone has ever gotten in trouble about overstepping this scope of work."

Other interviewees had utilized resources available to them through their job to try to help individuals they encountered. For example, a Community Center Manager recounted an instance where they became aware that a family with children was living in the large park where their center is located. The children attended programs at the facility, including a free program for elementary-aged children that provided hot meals. The center's staff began to send the children away with extra food. They saw the children on their own in the park, likely because their parents were at work, and said: "we kind of keep an eye on the kids." Eventually, the family left the park, and the Manager learned they were doing better.

The SPR interviewees provided examples of serious and urgent incidents occurring in their spaces in which they had tried to help. A Program Manager (Parks Department) responsible for park activation recounted an incident at Hing Hay Park, a public space in Seattle's Chinatown-International District that is frequently used by people experiencing houselessness. A visibly pregnant unhoused woman visited the park regularly, and park staff observed her using

drugs and engaging in sex work. Concerned for her well-being, the Program Manager contacted social service organizations to determine whether they were aware of the individual and her situation, or whether she had a case manager who could assist her. Initially unsure where to start, the Program Manager sought contacts from a colleague from a previous job. Her manager questioned her involvement. She replied:

I just reached out to a couple of groups that I know.' But he was like, 'this is not your job.' And I was like, 'Well, it is, and it isn't.' But you know, if you see a need, you feel the need, right? (Program Manager, Parks Department).

The interviewee recognized that while it was not her official responsibility, she felt the urgency to at least try to find help, understanding that if she did not, the consequences could be dire:

It comes down to - do we want a child to be born in the park, who's addicted to drugs, and not knowing whether that child will survive? I couldn't have that on my conscience. You can't ignore something like that. So, I think a lot of things that we do, it's where we're going (Program Manager, Parks Department).

This compulsion to help links to the motivation behind many of the SPR interviewees joining the profession in the first place which is based on a desire to make a difference and serve the public. It also indicates the lack of clarity in people's job descriptions regarding houselessness and explicit SPR guidance on the issues, outside of the general instruction that staff not get involved. The complexities and tensions this raises for the field of public parks and recreation, along with the need for official policy on houselessness, is also discussed in Chapters 9 and 11.

Reflections from interviewees reveal an emotional toll of responding to issues related to homelessness underscoring the scale and magnitude of challenges that compel SPR professionals to act. For example, one Park Concierge explained that while it is not officially her job to respond to unhoused people in need, it is part of her daily reality working in downtown parks. She regularly carries Narcan, a medication used to reverse opioid overdoses, (although she finds it intimidating to use), a box of cigarettes (purchased with her own money), and some first aid supplies. She uses cigarettes to de-escalate situations, saying offering a cigarette to individuals can help distract them: “that works well for some people.”

She shared the story of a man who lived on a park bench in Occidental Square in downtown Seattle for three months. The Concierge and a co-worker built a rapport with him; she would often buy him hot cocoa, and they would chat. However, she became increasingly concerned about his deteriorating physical and mental state. He stopped moving from the bench, even to use the bathroom; his hygiene worsened, and he developed a severe leg wound. One day, anxious about his declining health and feeling a sense of personal responsibility she decided to act, stating: “I said I’m not eating my lunch today unless you get help from the firefighters.” She also mentioned she would stop buying him cocoa, and he eventually agreed to a wellness check.

A social worker and a firefighter visited him weekly to dress his leg wound, but he remained on the bench.¹⁰² She was distressed that more help was not available for him and frustrated that she could not offer more. She asked: “Is it humane to leave him in that situation?” Eventually, the man was forced to move after being threatened by someone with a machete. He

¹⁰² She thinks this was a temporary working arrangement downtown following COVID as she tried to find the same assistance again for someone else and was told that it did not exist anymore.

collapsed after running away outside the park, and an ambulance took him to the hospital, where they had to amputate his leg. The Concierge had not seen him in the park since, but her colleague had tried to keep in touch with him and had visited him in the hospital, reflecting their ongoing concern about the individual and desire to help him.

A significant challenge for the interviewees in guiding their responses to individuals needing assistance in their spaces and amenities is the lack of established SPR guidelines specifically regarding houseless individuals. Although many park and recreation professionals have a high level of discretion and autonomy in their working lives, there are important risks associated with responding ad hoc to individuals in need or crises within their spaces. Staff members can find themselves in vulnerable or unsafe situations when they do not have official procedures to follow. Some SPR professionals will likely continue to feel a pressing need to act in the face of the significant challenges related to houselessness. However, having established guidance would help reduce the risks involved in taking action and ideally identify additional sources of support to assist their responses.

Reflecting on this, a Community Center Manager explained that the absence of clear policies forces them to work in reactionary and improvised ways to meet the needs of unhoused individuals visiting their centers and that this approach feels neither safe nor effective: “The mission just kind of says, ‘I’ll make it happen best of luck to you!’ And you’re like, as staff, [that’s] the way that it’s set up, it doesn’t feel safe. And it doesn’t feel like we’re actually providing help.”

Additionally, there are risks to the individuals they are trying to help. For instance, one Community Center Manager cautioned against inconsistent, on-the-spot responses, noting that

such responses can disadvantage individuals experiencing houselessness. He explained: “The numbers and intensity of the experience with the people experiencing homelessness at a site can vary, can really influence the site culture around it.” He compared one community center in northwest Seattle, where: “There's like three people that are experiencing homelessness that use that facility. Three, I know them all. And one of them will come in in the winter, and she will dry all her clothes out on that radiator.” At other community centers, this would not be permitted.

He emphasized the importance of providing consistent park and recreation services to unhoused populations across the city, stating:

The inconsistency can cause trauma. They don't know what to expect. They go to this site, and they have to do this. They were at this site; they have to do this. It's like, I have no stability in my life, and you're not helping me (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

The significant potential role of public park and recreation agencies in providing stable, consistent, care-based responses to individuals experiencing houselessness is further discussed in Chapter 15.

Responding to Crises: “We’re the Frontline”

A notable aspect of the interviews was that SPR participants frequently used military language, or war euphemisms, to describe their experiences of working in parks or community centers, employing terms like “frontline,” “fighter,” “battlefield,” “cannon-fodder,” and “deployed.” This language was most used when discussing houselessness or communicating concerns about their personal safety. The use of such terms signified the stress experienced by some interviewees, their feelings of being overwhelmed, and their role as first responders to crises. It also suggests that staff experience a “battle” of sorts in going against the grain to help

(discussed above) or in advocating for greater support and care for the unhoused people they encounter, particularly as these efforts to provide care go against expectations of their roles and responsibilities.

The term “frontline” was the most frequently used descriptor. This could involve being the first person on-site in a park or recreation center to respond to individuals in crisis. For example, a Program Manager (Parks Department) stated: “We’re on the frontline and showing compassion and redirecting them (individuals experiencing houselessness) safely.” Additionally, many of the SPR interviewees regularly interact with people experiencing houselessness and are often acutely aware of their needs or the challenges these individuals are facing. They are frequently operating without internal guidance (discussed above) and external support from specialist social service providers, which can result in feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Working on the frontline could also involve being responsible for fixing damage to spaces or amenities resulting from houselessness.

Some research participants identified SPR’s Park Concierges and Park Rangers as the positions most affected by houselessness and being most genuinely on the “frontline.”¹⁰³ They are stationed in downtown Seattle parks and in surrounding locations, such as Cal Anderson Park and Hing Hay Park, and work in areas most frequently used by people experiencing houselessness. The Park Ranger role primarily focuses on ensuring compliance with park laws

¹⁰³ It was challenging to get a complete understanding of the reality of working in these roles. I spoke with four Park Concierges plus two staff members with in-depth knowledge of the Concierge role. Unfortunately, I was unable to speak with any Park Rangers; therefore, information relevant to them is based on comments from other study participants.

and codes (City of Seattle, n.d. -b). They can issue warnings, including park trespass warnings or exclusion notices (also discussed in Chapter 6).

Park Concierges are less focused on enforcement than the Park Rangers and instead focus on more caring and supportive responses to try and assist individuals using their spaces. Concierges engage with the public, helping activate downtown spaces by assisting with events and programs. They also play a crucial role in de-escalating issues that may arise in a park (ZipRecruiter, 2025). Concierge kiosks, located within the downtown parks, may contain copies of the Emerald City Resource Guide, as well as emergency blankets and water.¹⁰⁴ Some Concierges choose to carry cigarettes or snacks for visitors to the park to help build rapport or de-escalate moments of tension. A Program Manager (Parks Department) with extensive experience working with Concierges described their role as: “Trying to do positive activation to counter what was happening [to downtown spaces]. Man, it works. It makes a huge difference in helping to reclaim the park in positive and proactive ways.”

Park Concierges place emphasis on becoming familiar with the individuals who are regularly present in Seattle’s downtown parks. They regularly interact with individuals experiencing houselessness, developing rapport, and sometimes building close relationships. A SPR interviewee, with deep knowledge of the Concierge Program, who requested they remain anonymous, explained: “They build relationships with the homeless, the people who view the park as their home or their space. So, they work really hard at building those relationships.” A Program Manager (Parks Department) explained: “we teach our Concierge to humanize, you

¹⁰⁴ I could not confirm if this is standard policy, it may be down to the discretion of the individual workers in the park on a given day.

know, and to connect with people.” Sometimes this effort leads to people reaching out to the Concierges for assistance: “they’ll come to the concierge and be like,” you’ve always helped me, can you help me do this? Or help me call detox.” The SPR interviewee, who requested to remain anonymous, shared:

People, you know, defecate in front of you, vomit in front of you and die. And after a while you do get used to it unfortunately, and it totally changes your life you know. But it’s also one of the most rewarding jobs too (Anonymous SPR interviewee, Parks Department).

They explained that many Concierges have backgrounds in “empathy-based jobs” or possess an understanding of trauma. They added: “half of them have people in their family that either have mental health crises or are homeless or have died from fentanyl.” The interviewee believed that without this personal connection, individuals are less likely to remain in the role, stating: “they’re in it for the right reasons. If you’re not this job is not for you. They don’t last.”

Concierges are often the first to respond during emergencies or crises in Seattle’s downtown parks. The job description for Park Rangers requires basic first aid and CPR certification, whereas this is listed as “preferred” but not compulsory for the Concierge position (LENSA, 2023; Jobzmall, 2025). Furthermore, the job descriptions for both the Ranger and Concierge roles do not mandate carrying opioid reversal medication such as Naloxone or Narcan (the brand name for Naloxone). However, in informal conversations with Concierges, three out of four stated that they voluntarily carry Narcan and are either prepared to use it or have already done so. For example, one Concierge mentioned she recently revived two people from

overdoses.¹⁰⁵ Thus reflecting the reality that these professionals are often the first to respond to crises in Seattle's park spaces, providing assistance ahead of Seattle's emergency services, and taking personal responsibility to try and help individuals.

Using war analogies some interviewees described how their daily working lives have negatively changed due to houselessness. Those working in parks expressed feeling increasingly unsafe, sometimes because they were verbally attacked. A Program Manager (Parks Department) responsible for activating downtown parks expressed strong concerns about his safety, stating that he often felt like "cannon fodder" in a war. He said:

I can't even count all the times that I've been assaulted. I've been chased with a big knife. I've been chased with a dirty syringe. I've been punched. I've been knocked down. Oh, I was chased with a broken bottle, surrounded by three people. I've been tussled with, grabbed numerous times had drug smoke blown on my face, got a double lung infection. So, it's a crazy job (Program Manager, Parks Department).

One Planning and Development worker (Parks Department) commented: "Sometimes the people living in the parks aren't, you know, they might be experiencing some mental illness. So, you'll get a lot of screaming at you just randomly." The interviewee who wished to remain anonymous described the Park Concierge role as: "the most dangerous job in the Parks Department." For instance, if a Concierge asks someone to leave a park, that interaction could quickly turn negative: "Concierges are there. They're targets." The presence of a Concierge might make some park visitors feel uneasy, for example: "if they're homeless, you're stepping into their home." They cited an example of a Concierge working in Cal Anderson Park who felt

¹⁰⁵ Both individuals chose to leave the park before an ambulance arrived, because: "they're scared they'll get in trouble for using drugs."

so unsafe that she locked herself in the field house: “she called the police, and the police never came.”

The interviewee also pointed out that the role of Park Ranger is safer and better funded, saying: “The Rangers got bulletproof vests, they get in their cars, they drive away.” They expressed frustration over the lack of appreciation for Concierges within SPR, emphasizing: “if the Concierge didn’t show up, we wouldn’t have downtown parks, we do everything and get no respect.”

Park Concierges respond to situations based on their judgment. For example, a Program Manager (Parks Department) explained, the Concierge staff are: “now erring on the side of not approaching when it comes to fentanyl because we’ve had so many instances of people being attacked.” Instead, they stated: “we only will interact when we know it’s a simply mental health issue, it’s something that we know we can handle and deal with, we feel safe doing it.” One Concierge explained that he first observes situations in the park to judge if he needs to call for additional assistance. He cited the example of a park user whom he assessed as unhoused who repeatedly interrupted a ping-pong game in Hing Hay Park. When he asked the individual to stop, the individual became aggravated, and the Concierge was uncertain how the situation might escalate. Ultimately, the individual picked up their belongings and decided to leave the park.

While Park Concierges play the key role in supporting and assisting individuals experiencing houselessness in parks, in community centers it is the front desk staff that serve as the public face of their facility. They regularly encounter the houseless individuals that visit their facilities. The importance of front desk staff in community centers was emphasized by a Community Center Manager, who noted that his staff are: “intervening in crisis constantly.”

However, he expressed concern that their job descriptions and compensation do not accurately reflect their critical role: “We have people that are paid \$18.69 to provide critical support during those moments. And you need good people, and you can’t always attract and retain those.”

Relatedly, he explained that some staff members have struggled to afford rent in Seattle, with some having ended up houseless, living in their cars. Another manager echoed these frustrations about low pay: “my starting, front desk workers, are paid less than if you work at Target and fold shirts.” This reflects the expensive reality of living in Seattle and the possibility that the marginalized individuals reliant on SPR spaces and amenities for their survival needs are sometimes not dissimilar in their circumstances to some SPR staff.

Negative Impacts: “The Park is Diminished”

The negative impacts arising from unhoused individuals using Seattle’s parks for their shelter and survival needs was a concern for some Park Department participants. Their reported concerns were related to landscape damage, trash, crime, and poor public safety. The perspectives below differ from the more caring and compassionate responses to the houseless outlined above. The Park Department interviewees described some spaces as “dominated” or “overwhelmed” by individuals experiencing houselessness, linking their use to other visitors feeling unsafe or reluctant to use the park. However, the interviewees were conflicted, recognizing their spaces are being heavily used by unhoused communities because they have nowhere else to go. Interviewees were frequently weary and demotivated by the decline in the quality of their parks suggesting a real ambivalence in their responses.

Some interviewees were concerned that they are no longer able to effectively steward Seattle’s parks because of the number of individuals experiencing houselessness using these

spaces for their shelter. They were troubled by the potential irreparable damage being done to the city's park landscapes. A worker in Planning and Development, (Parks Department) stated that Seattle's parks need "rescuing," while a Program Manager (Parks Department) spoke about the need for "reclaiming" these spaces. This reflects the tension between caring for the landscape and addressing the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness, with some interviewees worried about the vulnerability of public parks in this context. These tensions are further explored in the section on encampment sweeps below.

Several interviewees spoke of Seattle's parks becoming "overrun" by houseless individuals, deterring others from visiting these spaces, and reducing the park's value for the housed community. For example, a Maintenance Worker (Parks Department) stated: "When a park gets overrun with unsheltered individuals to where sheltered individuals don't feel comfortable coming to the park, there's a problem with that."

One Planning and Development worker (Parks Department) discussed a popular new playground in northwestern Seattle that has also become a gathering spot for people experiencing houselessness. He expressed that this play area is no longer a resource for the wider community, that it has been taken away: "We now need to go to Gilman Park early in the morning, because we've found needles there, we have found tents there. And it's an instant, all of a sudden, it takes away that play area from the community."

A few interviewees equated the presence of individuals experiencing houselessness in parks with an increase in crime or anti-social behavior. For example, an interviewee in enforcement and security (Parks Department) strongly felt that the presence of the houseless in public spaces makes local communities feel unsafe and hinders their ability to enjoy these

amenities. He negatively associated individuals experiencing houselessness to criminal activities in the park and drug use:

It's like people aren't even able to use the parks for their enjoyment right now. It's like a lot of people go to the parks, and they're scared to death because they know that there are certain people in the parks either camping or camped out there. Or they know they can go up and assault someone. Or they are sleeping in the playgrounds, they're doing the drugs (Enforcement and Security, Parks Department).¹⁰⁶

He added: “There are many times where parents will come up and say that they have found needles on the playground. And to me, that's sad. Because it's like, we can't even manage the parks for what they're supposed to be.” He suggested that all park staff should be given the authority to ban individuals from these spaces. However, he acknowledged the difficulty of enforcing such bans, asking: “how do you control that person from not going into one of our 489 parks?” The interviewee did not suggest alternative solutions such as enhanced trash collection or outreach support for the individuals in the park.

One quarter of the SPR interviewees portrayed the impact of houselessness on the city’s public parks as a diminishment, with the damage caused from encampments, or heavy use for people’s survival needs resulting in a loss of these public assets for the broader community. A Planning and Development worker (Parks Department) stated: “The park is diminished after they [houseless] leave.” This diminishment might be in terms of a loss of landscape services, such as shade or habitat diversity, or as wasted financial investment in these amenities. The challenges of

¹⁰⁶ The interviewees quoted here and in the following section equated individuals experiencing houselessness with those struggling with addiction issues, conflating the two challenges.

maintaining parks in the context of houselessness are also discussed below in the section on feelings of futility.

Upsetting the Balance: “They’d Want to Sit and Linger”

The previous chapter explored the SPR interviewee’s aspirations of providing public park and recreation amenities that are “open to all,” and the balancing acts they undertake to keep spaces inclusive and welcoming. However, when participants were asked about houselessness, they expressed concerns about attracting a large number of individuals experiencing houselessness to their parks and facilities. They worry this could upset the balance among different groups of visitors and raise expectations for services they do not have the capacity to provide. Like the concerns expressed by the Park Department interviewees above, they are anxious that their spaces and amenities could become overwhelmed but also conflicted by their desire to serve the individuals using their spaces. This illustrates a tension between being welcoming and attracting people to parks and amenities, and SPR’s ability to provide safe and inclusive spaces.

A Maintenance Worker (Parks Department) explained that parks can be places where people experiencing houselessness meet and spend the day. He was concerned that if people are allowed to linger too long, the number of the unhoused would swell as others come to join them, and this would encourage anti-social behavior: “Some of the parks where they congregate at, if this is a park where they were, for one reason or another, there's a lot of drug activity going on. You don't want to curate a warm zone for that.” In other words, the interviewee was concerned that the park would be too comfortable a spot for unhoused individuals and equated this welcoming environment with increased negative or criminal activity.

Other interviewees are struggling to determine the best approach between balancing the needs of different communities, keeping their spaces safe, and their feelings of empathy for individuals experiencing houselessness. For example, a Community Center Manager at a facility with a large parking lot often occupied by individuals living in cars and RVs, stated that she avoids reporting these vehicles immediately, allowing them a few days to a week to relocate, because: “we don’t want to displace people.” However, she also noted that these RVs sometimes serve as sites for drug consumption and may even be used for drug sales, raising concerns about the impact on her center’s clientele if she does not eventually report them.

Several community center interviewees discussed the challenges of managing amenities or services with limited or finite supply, and their ability to meet people’s needs. They voiced concerns that addressing the considerable needs of the unhoused community might “take away” provision for other groups. For instance, the Operations Manager (Recreation Department) pointed out the dilemma of using community centers as emergency shelters: “In our world, when you open an emergency shelter, you’re closing a community center. So, we can’t run our teen late-night program. Seniors can’t come and exercise and tots can’t play in the tot gym.” She was worried that a reduction in program availability could also impact future enrollments at the center, potentially leading to cancellations, a decrease in services for the broader community, and a decline in their funding.

Finally, some of the community center interviewees were concerned about raising expectations for additional services, such as food or hygiene items. They perceived this as potentially disruptive, either because too many people visit to access items or because they could disappoint people if they run out of supplies. They were also concerned about negative

implications for other users if too many people experiencing houselessness use their facilities. For example, one Community Center Manager stated that if free food or hot drinks were offered within a community center: “they’d want to sit and linger” and: “if we run out of provisions then they get mad.” Another center manager also shared concerns about creating expectations among the houseless community: “once a while, we might get some socks or something. But the problem is when you run out, they expect it. And I had no budget for it.” This then might lead to: “a difficult conversation or customer. And you just set yourself up for it. That’s especially with the volume that we had.”

Feelings of Futility: “It’s Like the Old Whack-a-Mole Game”

Out of the 24 SPR interviewees, eight were willing to share their perspectives or direct experiences regarding the City of Seattle’s policy of removing houseless encampments from public spaces.^{107,108} Five interviewees expressed feelings of futility or discomfort regarding this policy, the treatment of individuals experiencing houselessness, and SPR’s role in moving people from their homes. Their concerns mainly focused on the ineffectiveness of forcibly removing people who have nowhere to go and the belief that public resources are not being utilized effectively. The examples provided further information on the balancing acts SPR professionals navigate to keep spaces safe and natural areas protected, with some interviewees also feeling empathy for individuals who use these areas for their shelter.

¹⁰⁷ To supplement information gathered from SPR participants about sweeps, interviews were conducted with two individuals from the Office of Mayor Bruce Harrell and five individuals working in houseless outreach programs in Seattle.

¹⁰⁸ The remaining interviewees were either hesitant to comment while speaking in a professional capacity or felt uncomfortable discussing the issue without first obtaining permission from their managers.

For example, one individual responsible for security and enforcement (Parks Department) was directly involved in encampment removals for SPR until the Navigation Team was established in 2017.¹⁰⁹ This interviewee reported feeling relieved when the team was formed, estimating prior to this he spent approximately 75% of his workday removing tents and other structures from spaces. He described feeling that his job had become “dumbed down,” stressful, and unsafe. He described his experiences of removing encampments from Seattle’s parks:

A lot of times they left the camps booby trapped for us. And we would find ammunition and other weapons hidden in the camps; they would put broken glass on different branches of the trees with a trigger wire. So, if we hit the wire, it comes down and hurt somebody. And they also would fill the brush that we’re cleaning out with used needles so that when we our crews would start cleaning up the needles would literally like rain down on us. So, it was pretty stressful (Security and Enforcement, Parks Department).

This interviewee did not believe the policy of encampment removal is effective, explaining: “we are spending a lot of money just cleaning up. But it’s like the old whack-a-mole game.” They clear areas only for people to return:

Remediate a site. And within months, guess what, after we cleaned it up? It’s back. And I’ve seen too many of our sites, our open space sites, our park sites, our right-of-way sites, that I know we cleaned it up, and I look at it, it’s worse than what it was (Security and Enforcement, Parks Department).

Another colleague in Planning and Development (Parks Department) shared similar frustrations, noting: “a lot of times I just see people move once they get like the notice and a lot of times, I see them go around the corner and a lot of times we see them right back [in the park].” A Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) also questioned the financial

¹⁰⁹ This team appears to be a forerunner to the Unified Care Team, which is now responsible for leading encampment removals in Seattle, as described in Chapter 6.

implications of encampment removals, stating: “we’re dumping money into the problem, but we’re not dumping it in a way that makes sense.”

Furthermore, some interviewees expressed a conflict between their compassion for the unhoused and their professional responsibility to protect park spaces, further illustrating the balancing acts SPR staff must undertake in their stewardship. An individual working in Planning and Development (Parks Department) participated in the May 2022 Woodland Park encampment sweep, which removed approximately 40 tents and temporary housing structures constructed during the pandemic (Kim, 2022). During the sweep, the worker observed sophisticated structures in which significant effort had been made to create a livable home. He explained: “They regrade the hillside, they put in a levelled area where they can have a table, and they can have a coffee sign. It’s somebody creating their own backyard.”¹¹⁰ He felt disturbed upon discovering these makeshift homes and participating in their destruction, stating: “you have empathy for them, and you realize yeah, they have made it pretty comfortable.” However, he was also distressed by the damage these structures had caused to the park and its trees. He noted:

They have tarps, they're underneath trees hidden. But those tarps are on the ground, and tarps up here; you're not getting any rainwater in, you're restricting the amount of CO² that gets out and oxygen gets in. And so, they create these dead zones. And they're underneath established trees (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

Some trees had begun to decline and die. One solution would have been to water the trees; however, he concluded: “we're not monsters, people are living there, we can't turn on the sprinklers.” Instead, SPR would work to restore the landscape after the encampment was

¹¹⁰ By “coffee sign” he means adding décor and homely touches to the structure.

removed. This tension between providing care for individuals experiencing houselessness and the non-human world is also examined in Chapter 4.

One Community Center Manager stated that he fundamentally disagrees with SPR's involvement in encampment sweeps, describing it as:

Incredibly damaging to our reputation with the public, like, we can't be the trauma inducers to the people we're trying to serve, we need to be the safe caring space, right? And so, when our name is attached to a mismanaged, or at least, whether it's mismanaged or not, trauma inducing process, it really inhibits our ability to be trusted in what we do (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

He viewed their involvement as causing trauma and contradictory to the mission of public parks and recreation, damaging their relationships with the local community.

Taking A Greater Role: “Has to Be Planned and Organized”

The interviewees were asked whether they believe public park and recreation agencies should take on a greater future role in meeting the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness. Many felt uncertain, recognizing their potential to play a valuable role, but they were worried it could add further complexity and breadth to their roles and leave them feeling even more unsupported. The participants called for discussion within SPR about the services they have the capacity, skills, and resources to provide, as well as proper policy and guidance to underpin their work regarding houselessness.

For example, a Community Center Manager (Recreation Department) expressed his internal conflict regarding the public park and recreation profession taking a greater role in addressing houselessness. He remarked: “we’re here to build community which is a social thing.” However, he also questioned whether assisting unhoused populations is part of their

purpose. He mentioned ongoing discussions about services for a new community center that will host a free shower program. Some colleagues have suggested adding coin-operated laundry facilities, as these services are frequently requested by shower users. He asked:

Is that really the mission of the community center? I mean, we want to serve everybody, and we want folks to be welcome. And I'm sure homeless folks feel an attachment coming to a park or community center, and it's a safe place. But it doesn't mean that I should be...we're not Union Gospel (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).¹¹¹

This apprehension about mission creep was also shared by interviewees from other Seattle city departments, indicating a broader concern about the scope of work SPR carries out. Two Community Support Officers from the Seattle Police Department echoed this sentiment, stating that increasing responsibilities for park agencies might divert them from their core mission of serving the entire community.¹¹² They emphasized: "parks are such a unifying space for the community as a whole right?" They added: "we don't want to take away from all that parks already do for the community, by putting more on their plate."

While some interviewees were not opposed to expanding the profession's role in responding to issues associated with houselessness, they stressed the need for additional guidance, training, and skills. A Community Center Manager stated the field of public parks and recreation needs to pick a lane, saying: "we need to pick it, do it really well, and honor the fact we are professionals doing it." He was concerned about potentially being tasked with additional responsibilities without adequate support: "I struggle with how I feel about it. I wish we could all

¹¹¹ Seattle's Union Gospel Mission provides programs to assist people in overcoming houselessness and recovering from addiction (www.ugm.org/).

¹¹² CSOs are outreach specialists that respond to non-emergency calls. More information is available: www.seattle.gov/police/community-policing/cso

be the ninjas that can do everything in society, and recreation professionals try to do it all. But there's a really broad skill set like to do all those different things, and I'm conflicted."

One Community Center Manager indicated openness to the idea of their center becoming more involved in directing people experiencing houselessness to support services. They are not currently doing this because: "They haven't given us the tools. Should the community centers be doing more outreach? I think there are ways that yes, absolutely that's in our mission." He added that, given the growth of houselessness in Seattle, they could play a positive role if properly supported.

Other interviewees also emphasized the need for balance and called for strategic discussions regarding the services SPR can provide to individuals experiencing houselessness. An Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department) described the need for "guardrails" to help guide their responses to unhoused populations and expressed a desire for open discussions about the types of services they can realistically provide and support. A Community Center Manager also brought up the discussions regarding the addition of laundry services to shower sites, to emphasize the need for balance, proper planning, and the need to bring in staff with the right skills:

What I wouldn't want to see us being is the fill gap [sic] for every minor problem that pops up, which is what we currently are trying to do, where it's like, "Oh, hey, we need laundry services, oh, hey, we need a large shelter". And you know, emergency shelter is fine. It just has to be planned and organized. And our staff needs to be trained. And we need to make sure that we have things on site, like security and somebody who's trained in outreach (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

An outreach worker from REACH, a Seattle-based homeless outreach organization, shared insights regarding the knowledge gaps within SPR.¹¹³ He is occasionally invited by SPR to speak with the Park Rangers, using the opportunity to explain the services he can offer. He encourages the Rangers to ask him questions, with common inquiries including the causes of houselessness and strategies for effective communication with unhoused individuals: “They’re also interested in basically kind of like services that are available. A lot is difficult for me to comprehend. So, they don’t even know what advice to offer folks.”

The outreach worker further explained that some Rangers do not know how to respond when someone in the park asks for food. He believes there is a significant issue with information sharing within SPR and hopes the agency develops more efficient ways to disseminate practical knowledge internally about available support services in Seattle. Similarly, a Program Manager at UHeights Center, a nonprofit in Seattle, advised, “you don’t always have to reinvent the wheel,” emphasizing that park agencies do not need to start from scratch. There are existing resources to help them move forward. The availability of external support is further discussed in Chapter 16.

Summary

The issue of houselessness is complex and divisive, as reflected in the SPR interviewees’ experiences delivering and managing services in this context, their perspectives on their roles and responsibilities, and personal opinions about unhoused individuals. Serving in frontline services and regularly interacting with diverse groups, the interviewees feel a heavy burden of

¹¹³ REACH is the name of the organization, not an acronym.

responsibility to respond to individuals experiencing houselessness in their spaces, while also feeling conflicted about their changing role and unsure how to help. Between these two realities, the interviewees try to assist individuals experiencing houselessness, recognizing the humanity of those affected, and at the same time keep their spaces and amenities open, well-maintained, and welcoming for others to enjoy.

The professionals interviewed for this study emphasized that they are public servants motivated to serve their communities and meet diverse needs. Many recognized that publicly funded park and recreation agencies already play an important role in responding to issues related to houselessness. While some participants questioned whether individuals were genuinely without homes and argued that they did not enter the service to address issues related to houselessness, they continue to try to meet the needs of their communities and offer high-quality amenities. Others are building rapport with the individuals who rely on their spaces for survival and empathizing with their circumstances. This demonstrates the commitment of park and recreation professionals to make a difference and serve everyone regardless of their housing status.

However, although most interviewees affirmed that it is within the role of park and recreation agencies to address issues related to houselessness, they expressed reservations about labeling their activities as “social services.” They were concerned that this designation might detract from their overall mission of serving everyone. Additionally, some were wary about specifically focusing on the needs of unhoused populations, anxious that this could potentially place them in a challenging position with too many responsibilities, struggling to meet the needs of their other communities effectively.

The interviewees report that at times their work is unsafe, leading to stress and trauma. Many report a lack of adequate support when addressing issues related to houselessness and are often unsure whom to contact for assistance or how to proceed. They struggle to access specialist help for individuals in crisis and sometimes intervene in ad hoc and improvised ways. The interviewees are making difficult, complex judgments about the best course of action in the absence of official policy guidance, management direction, or training on houselessness.

Overall, the interviewees are acutely aware that they are managing limited resources and feel conflicted about maintaining “open to all” and inclusive amenities while balancing the needs of other populations using the same spaces. Public parks were not originally designed to serve as shelters; as a result, the interviewees noted that the parks are sustaining damage from this use. They expressed a conflict between their responsibilities as stewards of the landscape and their obligations towards the individuals experiencing houselessness in those spaces. This conflict is an important theme in this study and will be further explored in the next chapter.

Some interviewees are re-evaluating their future in public parks and recreation, stating that their current roles are not what they originally signed up for or that they feel unqualified. Others believe that issues relating to houselessness are now an unavoidable part of their daily reality and should not be ignored. The next chapter will explore interviewees’ perspectives on the notion of “care” and how this might relate to public park and recreation services and offer an alternative direction for the profession amid houselessness.

Chapter Nine: Care in Public Parks and Recreation Services and Future Directions

Introduction

The previous two chapters examined the realities of delivering park and recreation amenities in Seattle, highlighting the complexities faced by Seattle Park and Recreation (SPR) interviewees working amid rising houselessness to provide high-quality, accessible, and open public amenities. Challenges include coping with changing roles, making difficult judgment calls, and navigating complex trade-offs. This chapter focuses on the Seattle-based interviewees' thoughts on how the idea of care relates to public park management and recreation service delivery, and their perspectives on the future direction of these services in the context of houselessness. The chapter draws on interviews in Seattle, with 24 SPR employees and 16 social outreach workers, police officials, community safety officers, and relevant nonprofit interviewees.

Interviewees were asked how the idea of care might relate to park and recreation services.¹¹⁴ The questions regarding care were not easy for people to answer. Most had not previously thought much about care as a standalone concept in relation to public parks and recreation, and while many interviewees articulated ideas off the top of their heads, some found

¹¹⁴ Participants were not given a specific definition of care and were free to respond as they wished. Only one person shared an example of care that did not have a positive resonance. He described being in another U.S. state and witnessing an unhoused individual being escorted away from a public space. He interpreted this situation as the person being taken to receive help, and because there was no struggle involved, he felt that it was consensual and an example of care at that moment.

it hard to answer fully. Many felt that care in parks and recreation means serving or helping people, welcoming and building relationships with the community, providing high-quality amenities and services, and protecting the landscape. These perspectives are explored further below. The unhoused interviewees were also asked about their thoughts on care, which are summarized in Chapter 10.

The interviewees shared their ideas on how SPR could work differently, including enhancing training and knowledge, recruiting specialized staff, developing new partnerships, providing new services, or using SPR amenities in different ways. Some participants had already given significant thought to the future of these services prior to our interview. While most focused on ideas to address current shortfalls or challenges amid growing houselessness, others also shared their ideals for future park and recreation agencies. Many ideas pointed to a broader role for agencies, beyond the provision of recreation.¹¹⁵ These ideas are discussed in the sections below, and Appendix N provides a full list of all the ideas for new services and alternative ways of working suggested by the interviewees.

A Caring Profession: “Greeting with Dignity is Caring”

Many in the parks and recreation profession are motivated to make a positive difference (NRPA, n.d.- c). When asked how the notion of care is demonstrated within their work, some SPR interviewees stated that their profession attracts individuals who are genuinely interested in serving others and are naturally caring. The participants provided different examples of care in

¹¹⁵ Certain ideas were beyond the scope of SPR, such as building more affordable housing, providing tiny homes, and expanding access to drug detox services. These suggestions are summarized in Appendix O.

parks and recreation, offering varied understandings of what constitutes care, including providing welcoming spaces and amenities. Different notions of care are also further discussed later in this chapter.

The Recreation Department interviewees were particularly clear that the public park and recreation profession includes many individuals who are caring and compassionate. Responses from Community Center Managers included the following quotes: “Recreation people are people-people and care a lot” and “We in this field tend to be a really compassionate group of people. We didn’t get into this because we don’t care about people.” Additionally, a manager connected the long service records of his colleagues (also discussed in Chapter 7) with the fact they care:

Every single person I've worked with, in parks and rec, cares deeply about their community. That's why they're here. Not one person I've talked to is like, “I'm doing this just for the money, or I'm doing this to put it on my resume for later.” It's all been, “hey, I really care about my community. And I want to figure out a way to give back (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Other interviewees also described their colleagues as motivated to help. An Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department), commenting on the interactions of parks workers with individuals experiencing houselessness, said: “I think people’s own values and beliefs have a lot to do with how they treat anybody, but I see parks workers being really very caring and supportive.” Professionals working in parks can develop close connections with the individuals living in their spaces. Members of the Concierge Team (Parks Department) were devastated by the death of a man who had lived in Pioneer Square for years. He had finally succeeded in finding housing, but would return to the park to say hello, maintaining a friendship with the park staff and a connection to the space he had relied on:

We get close to these people; it devastated all of us when he passed away. He was our success story. He'd come back to the park just to check in and tell us he's doing good in the house, because while they're vulnerable, we're their only family (Program Manager, Parks Department).

Care in relation to the provision of public park and recreation services was described in various ways. For instance, by ensuring services are delivered well and provide a good experience for everybody in the community. Three interviewees in park-based roles believed that care involves maintaining inclusive, clean, well-maintained spaces and amenities. For an Administrative Support Worker (Parks Department), care is demonstrated through the provision of open, clean bathrooms, which is especially important for individuals experiencing homelessness: "Our restrooms are for everybody. And so doing the best we can to have them cleaned and opened for unsheltered populations."

Several interviewees from the Recreation Department emphasized that welcoming individuals into their facilities is an act of care. For example, one Community Center Manager explained that caring is part of good service, ensuring that visitors can relax and enjoy their time at the community center. He remarked:

What is good customer service to the community center? It's caring about the folks that come in, realizing that they didn't come here to hear about your problems. They're here to forget about theirs. And so, you want to keep it very friendly. That's the caring; it's funny how a smile can change someone's whole day, or a kind word (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Another Community Center Manager stated, "greeting with dignity is caring." He recounted an encounter with an individual whom they assessed as unhoused. One day, this individual entered the center asking to use the restrooms. A front desk member assured her she was welcome and engaged her in conversation. He explained: "He made a comment like you

know, “I can tell you’ve got a really beautiful soul.” And she started crying and wanted a hug and he gave her a hug. And it was that moment that made this a caring space where she felt safe again.”

A few days later, the same woman returned just as the center was closing for the night. She urgently needed to use the restroom and appeared agitated: “She was just in this moment of my body's not working, my mental health isn't working, none of this is working. Is it safe for me to walk inside? But I'm not allowed to, I'm trying to follow the rules, but I can't follow the rules.” The center staff recognized her from the previous visit and allowed her to come inside. The Manager reflected:

I like to think that hug and affirmation earlier gave her the courage amid that to come up to the door and try anyway. And then the staff did let her, and the community didn't push her away. And she got to use it even though we were closed. But that's kind of how care in that moment can work (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

He emphasized the importance of his community center as a “caring space” and expressed pride in how his staff managed the situation, acknowledging the individual's humanity and striving to meet her needs.

Finally, a Maintenance Worker (Parks Department) provided an interesting example of taking the initiative to ground his professional judgments in care and compassion when encountering tents and belongings of people using park spaces for shelter. If he believes someone is still using a tent, he will leave it for about a week before checking again. He ensures that he assesses the condition of the tents he finds. If they are tidy, he assumes they are in use; if items are scattered or exposed to the elements, he considers it acceptable to clear them or report them to the team responsible for encampment removals. He noted that he and his colleagues are:

“making these kinds of judgment calls to make sure. They should not just be carelessly throwing away somebody’s belongings.” He is careful not to dispose of people’s belongings unless he is confident they are abandoned because he believes “compassion “does not mean willfully just throwing away somebody's stuff.”

SPR’s strategic priorities include the “respectful cleaning of encampments.” The way this individual works could therefore be seen as achieving this objective (SPR, 2025b, p. 13).

However, the policy of encampment removal itself fundamentally lacks respect. Chapter 10 discusses the unhoused interviewees' experiences of this policy.

The Value of SPR’s Shower Program: “It’s More Than Just a Shower”

SPR’s free shower program was specifically highlighted by three Community Center Managers as an important example of care. Showers were considered a form of care because they help individuals feel better, both mentally and physically. Furthermore, occasionally, the shower sites might offer additional support to individuals experiencing houselessness. However, this support is ad hoc and cannot be relied upon.

Staff or former staff at four of the five SPR community centers with a free shower program were interviewed for this study. A Community Center Manager at a facility with a busy free shower program explained: “The benefits are when someone can get in and take a shower and feel worthwhile. They feel not just clean, but I think internally, mentally they feel better.” Another Community Center Manager connected SPR’s shower program to care and dignity, stating:

Just having a shower program is care, it's fundamentally care, right? People have the dignity to take care of their body and get clean and receive some help and have enough

time where you're not kicked out in three minutes (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Shower sites sometimes offer additional amenities to help people meet other needs, although Community Center Managers did not appear to be directly involved in organizing these resources. One Community Center Manager noted: "in our shower sites, it's more than just a shower. They often get donations of different things; bread, fruit, and I don't even know where it comes from."

Some Community Center Managers expressed mixed feelings about the shower program. On the one hand, the program is beneficial because it provides people experiencing homelessness access to showers and restrooms in a clean and safe environment. On the other hand, some questioned whether providing showers without consistent additional services - such as laundry, food or assistance in finding housing - might inadvertently do a disservice to those traveling into their centers. They raised concerns about whether it might be more effective to provide multiple services at a single location.

A Manager at one of the shower sites explained: "we're here to offer just one aspect of the difficulty of living unsheltered." Visitors to his center frequently ask if other forms of support are available:

That's where the debate among every shower site is, we're saying should we do this because is it serving in the best way? Because they're coming here asking for something they can't get it. And it kind of prolongs that cycle of poverty or being able to exit quickly (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

Chapter 11 will return to this point, including the inconsistencies in current services, and Chapter 16 examines the potential of community centers as multiple benefit spaces for individuals experiencing houselessness.

Care for the Non-Human World: “The Needs of the Flora and Fauna”

In contrast to the people-centered responses above, which are oriented towards providing welcoming environments and supportive services, three Planning and Development participants (Parks Department) described care as their role in the stewardship of the land. They identified themselves as custodians, protecting green and open spaces from harm, and highlighted their skills and horticulture training background. At the same time, however, they also note the need to broaden that understanding of care to others, including those experiencing houselessness.

One interviewee explained that when asked about care in relation to park management and services: “my brain goes to a narrow myopic fixation on horticulture and plants.” He instinctively focuses on delivering a high standard of care for the landscape, which is a key responsibility for many public park professionals. He explained:

If you're a gardener or a senior gardener, that's gonna be most of your work week caring for these different habitats in developed park[s] primarily. And then our staff - we have our best management practices, we're providing care. But I think a lot of our daily routines are focusing more on custodial tasks (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

He acknowledged the importance of adopting a broader perspective, saying he challenges himself to think more widely to consider the needs of individuals using parks:

But you know, having this role, I just have to have a broader, more holistic view of the landscape. And so, it's not just considering the needs of the flora and fauna. But it's the social needs, the needs of people, the needs for recreation and need for access. So, it's

more nuanced, but I force myself to see those other nuances (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

A second Planning and Development Worker (Parks Department) added that care in parks maintenance is often not straightforward. For example, some landscapes may appear disordered despite significant effort by SPR to manage and maintain them. He remarked: “you could do all the care in the world, and it could look horrible.” The appearance of spaces matters because “people take that as a reflection of themselves.”¹¹⁶

This tension between providing care for the landscape and care for the individuals who are reliant on public parks for their daily shelter and survival needs was also evident in the previous chapter. The Parks Department interviewees are very concerned about the negative impact of issues related to houselessness on Seattle’s parks, with some interviewees describing their “diminished” condition in Chapter 8. In the context of this chapter, this tension was articulated as a desire to safeguard park landscapes from the damage that can arise from being used for shelter. For example, a Planning and Development interviewee (Parks Department) expressed a strong belief that public parks in Seattle are being severely degraded by individuals who use them as shelters or for their daily needs. For him, care for these spaces would be placing limits on their use. He specifically suggested limiting access to these spaces for people experiencing houselessness, stating: “we actually have to take back the parks and recreation facilities to protect it.”

¹¹⁶ Nassauer examines the aesthetic value of spaces as demonstrating cues to care, for example Nassauer, J.I. (1995). Messy ecosystems, orderly frames.” *Landscape Journal*, 14(2): 161–170. doi:10.3368/lj.14.2.161

In this instance, care for the park is not care for the individuals who would like to access the space. Different notions of care can therefore contradict one another; this is further examined in Chapter 16. Notably, the unhoused individuals interviewed for this study also described care as a need to protect and maintain park landscapes. Some shared their extensive efforts to keep these spaces clean. Their perspectives and experiences are explored in Chapter 10.

Providing Assistance: “I Am Here to Help”

The final three sections of this chapter explore the interviewees’ suggestions for the future role of public park and recreation agencies in the context of houselessness. Ideas focused on SPR’s future direction regarding the significant unsheltered population in Seattle and the role of public parks and recreation in addressing houselessness more broadly. Most participants shared ideas, with some having given the issue extensive consideration prior to the interview. There was a collective desire to move away from ad hoc, reactionary responses to houselessness towards defined procedures and official policies within SPR, underpinned by support and training. Notably, several Community Center Managers stated that, due to their job’s high degree of autonomy and the absence of SPR leadership direction, they could probably revise their center’s policies and work in relation to houselessness as they see fit.

The proposed ideas for the future direction of park and recreation services focused on better utilizing park or community center amenities to offer additional resources and activities for individuals experiencing houselessness. Importantly, the ideas also involved officially acknowledging their role. A Program Manager (Parks Department) stated: “There just needs to be an admission that it is our problem. But it's not solely our problem.” He added: “I don't see a Parks Department dropping any of its traditional roles in lieu of that. So, I don't think that a

Parks Department needs to change. It needs to add.” This important idea of “adding” to the profession could include bringing in new staff with different expertise (further discussed below) but also entails the explicit recognition that responding to houselessness falls within the responsibilities of the field of public parks and recreation.

Some interviewees would like to see a greater stewardship of park facilities, including the provision of restroom attendants to maintain cleanliness in parks frequently used by unhoused individuals. One Center Manager expressed a desire for parks and recreation agencies to create intentionally welcoming spaces for unhoused individuals, stating: “make this a place for them to opt back in.” Another Center Manager, whose facility is often visited by individuals experiencing houselessness, expressed a desire to improve the facility’s response to requests for assistance. He stated: “given the problems that we have, we would be a frontline identifier for the programs that actually provide help.” Ideally, he envisions having a resource sheet to reference when individuals seek support:

I could just say, “let me look at my sheet,” and it would have keywords on the sheet that’s like food, housing, substance abuse, mental health. And then I could just follow a tree and say, here’s the number, and the person at the other end of that number would be like, “hi I am a trained person in this regard, and I am here to help (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

As discussed in earlier chapters, many SPR interviewees have a high degree of autonomy in their roles. Two Community Center Managers stated that, given the nature of their roles, they have the authority to adjust their work practices and could proactively revise their policies to better equip themselves going forward. Both managers felt it was important to move away from a mindset of seeking permission from upper management, with one manager explaining: “There’s

so much policy that we don't want to make a mistake so we're always asking permission. But we do have within policies, we do have, a wide swath of discretion.”

Some interviewees recognized the potential benefit of SPR leveraging its status as a large-city organization to make a difference. For example, they mentioned such things as organizing meetings with other local public realm organizations, reviewing recruitment policies (e.g., background-check requirements), and evaluating community center design to enhance safety and accessibility. Others focused on the better utilization of park and recreation assets. Suggestions included providing space for mobile health teams to meet their unhoused clients, establishing safe parking lots for people living in vehicles, allowing individuals to store their bags and essential items on park property, hosting food pantries, and installing needle disposal boxes. Chapter 16 further explores various actions to implement place-based care approaches, which combine higher-level strategic responses with localized, on-the-ground initiatives.

Hiring Specialists: “I Would Like to Bring in a Social Worker”

A key challenge reported in Chapter 7 is that the interviewees feel that SPR management often assumes their staff can handle issues related to houselessness, despite many reporting they feel overwhelmed, under-skilled, and out of their depth. To help meet their needs, some participants expressed interest in hiring new staff with expertise in social and mental health support and outreach, particularly those with experience working with unhoused communities. Additional expertise would improve their ability to respond effectively to issues related to houselessness, helping to relieve pressure on the existing SPR staff and potentially facilitate the transfer of new knowledge and skills within that environment.

A Community Center Manager shared an example from a previous center where he worked with a recreation attendant who held a degree in clinical psychology. Although this attendant has since left SPR, during her tenure, she trained colleagues to engage with young people on the autistic spectrum. The manager reflected on the lasting impact of this experience, stating the knowledge he gained continues to guide him in creating a supportive environment for all center visitors: “it gave me a lot of tools moving forward.” He anticipates that should SPR choose to recruit individuals with skills and knowledge relating to houselessness, there would be similar ripple effects across the organization. Likewise, a Program Manager (Parks Department) suggested bringing in new skills and resources to respond effectively to houselessness. He explained:

Because of the increase in visible homelessness in our parks, it does require an additional resource, an additional kind of group, or an additional kind of approach to it in our parks. And whether that means creating a new unit or creating the necessary contracts and tools to groups that are much better at it than us (Program Manager, Parks Department).

He proposed establishing a dedicated team or division within SPR to address houselessness. He remarked:

The only way from an organizational standpoint, the way I would see a parks department being more deeply involved in the homeless crisis, would have to be creation of an entirely different division. And that’s not without precedent and it’s not without cause. Like that is something that could be done theoretically, right? (Program Manager, Parks Department).

The same Program Manager emphasized the importance of engaging and collaborating with the right organizations, echoing observations in Chapter 8 about existing SPR staff being ill-equipped to respond to houselessness: “Why try to have a bunch of horticulturalists and HR specialists address the housing when you can contract it out to a nonprofit that does it for a

living.” Several other participants noted that Seattle Public Libraries (SPL) have recently adapted their services to assist the growing number of individuals experiencing houselessness using their facilities. Changes include hiring a Social Services Librarian, organizing events to connect library patrons with services, and hosting Community Resource Specialists at the Seattle Central Library.¹¹⁷ Future research could examine the SPL’s response, its applicability to public park and recreation services, and transferable lessons for future ways of working. Chapter 16 also discusses where further research would be valuable.

Four Community Center Managers expressed interest in establishing a social worker position based at their facilities. One Community Manager, with over 30 years of experience, stated: “I would like to be able to bring in a social worker, contract out, have a room, that’s just for that person to help, assist people.” Her center operates six days a week and could potentially accommodate a full-time social worker if funding permits. She had also considered offering free space to a student social worker for hands-on experience. Ideally, she would like to see a social worker based at each of the six community center shower program sites, as these locations frequently serve unhoused visitors. She observed that using rooms for such purposes has historical precedence: “back in the early 1990s we did have those rooms set up at certain community centers called the Family Center.”

Other Managers also contemplated how to effectively incorporate social work expertise within SPR facilities. One manager suggested that Green Lake Community Center is a suitable location for a full-time social worker, given its history of use by the unhoused community.

¹¹⁷ www.spl.org/programs-and-services/civics-and-social-services/social-services-referrals

Another proposed recruiting a peripatetic social worker who could aid centers experiencing the most need.

Some park-based staff discussed the importance of bringing in additional expertise or stewardship in the park spaces frequented by individuals experiencing houselessness. A Concierge (Parks Department) explained that having social workers regularly present in Seattle's downtown parks would be beneficial, asking: "they do pop ups for cell phones, why don't they do pop ups for shelters or where to go at night?" One Community Center Manager suggested that social workers accompany Concierges on certain days within parks.

There is a precedent for stationing outreach workers in public spaces in Seattle. The Seattle Downtown Association (SDA) previously stationed outreach workers at Westlake Park, a downtown Seattle park often frequented by people experiencing houselessness. The SDA's Director, Community Safety and Hospitality, explained:

Two days a week we would have our outreach members of our outreach team stationed at Westlake and what that allowed is that our ambassadors could do is, if our Ambassadors woke somebody up, could say 'hey our outreach team right now is at Westlake Park. Can we walk you over to Westlake Park? And then you can meet with, you know, our folks over there?' (Director, Community Safety and Hospitality, SDA).

Unfortunately, this practice ended when the SDA's outreach team was disbanded following the establishment of the Partnership for Zero in 2022, which lasted only one year. Appendix I provides details about this program and the impact its closure had on support services for unhoused populations in downtown Seattle. Furthermore, Chapter 13 explores the example of Woodruff Park in Atlanta, where a social worker was based in the park to assist the local unhoused community.

Developing New Partnerships “Empower Change Agents”

In addition to enhancing their skills and knowledge, and potentially recruiting new staff with expertise in houselessness, some interviewees highlighted the importance of developing new partnerships with social support organizations. Three interviewees noted that by collaborating with a broader range of organizations, park and recreation agencies could provide a higher level of public service. The ability to work in different ways is also discussed in Chapter 16.

Park and recreation agencies already engage with a wide variety of organizations, and partnership-working is a core responsibility for many professionals in this field. One Community Center Manager connected the idea of working with a wider range of organizations to improve service to the community, stating: “what we have to do is collaborate, form partnerships - so we can better serve.” Another Center Manager discussed the benefits of partnering with social services, expressing hope that such collaborations would enhance their ability to: “be a little more collective about the built spaces that people go into, and how they request and access services.”

A Program Manager (Parks Department) stressed the importance of partnerships in making meaningful changes, stating it is important to: “Find systems that elevate and empower change agents to make a difference and then find institutional ways upon which to deal with those who hurt.” Collaborating with organizations specializing in social support is also a topic of active discussion at several shower sites and does have precedence in Seattle. One interviewee noted the benefits of partnering with Uplift Northwest, a nonprofit that operates the busy free-shower program at the Green Lake Community Center.

Finally, an outreach worker from REACH also highlighted the need for park and recreation agencies to seek new partnerships to better assist unhoused communities. He remarked: “Invite someone else to help you with a situation that you’re finding difficult. And you will find how many helpful people there are.” He added: “there are a lot of helping hands in the community that wants to help you do all kinds of things.” While he acknowledged that bringing in outside organizations may require adjusting existing rules and protocols within agencies, he urged park and recreation staff to step outside their comfort zones: “Just do it! And you’ll find that people will be like, huh? Are you allowed? Stop me! That’s the American way!”

Summary

The SPR interviewees understood care in the context of parks and recreation as involving activities that are central to their profession. This includes welcoming individuals to their amenities, assisting people, building relationships with visitors, and providing high-quality services. These activities are important elements within this study’s case studies of park-based care approaches, which are further explored in Chapters 12-14. This shared understanding underscores the compatibility of place-based care approaches to the field of public parks and recreation.

The interviewees are acutely aware that they oversee a finite public service. Additionally, some interviewees highlighted their important responsibilities as stewards of the landscape and the tension between serving individuals experiencing houselessness while continuing to safeguard the quality of public spaces. Issues relating to houselessness challenge traditional perspectives regarding the function of public parks as well as ideas about the proper role of park and recreation agencies (discussed in Chapter 2). This conceptual history continues to influence

perceptions of parks and their contemporary activities but that also, the interviewees do perceive a broader role for public park and recreation agencies going forward. This wider role is further explored in Chapter 16.

There is a collective desire among the interviewees to move away from ad hoc, reactionary responses to houselessness towards defined procedures and official policies within SPR, underpinned by support and training. A crucial first step is for agencies to recognize that responding to houselessness aligns with the responsibilities of contemporary parks and recreation. The study participants identified strategies to address gaps in skills and training, including recruiting additional specialized support, building partnerships with social service agencies, and utilizing park and recreation amenities in different ways.

The next chapter examines the perspectives of individuals currently experiencing houselessness who use public parks and recreation amenities for daily shelter and survival. This is followed by Chapter 11, which explores the key themes arising from all the Seattle interviews and their implications for the future potential of public parks and recreation amenities to serve as spaces of care for individuals experiencing houselessness.

Chapter 10: Perspectives of Individuals Experiencing Houselessness

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of individuals experiencing chronic houselessness who rely on public parks and recreation amenities for some or all their daily needs. It is vital to include the voices of those with lived experience of houselessness, as these perspectives are often missing from academic studies and public policy-making. This omission reduces unhoused individuals to passive subjects rather than active participants in their own narratives, obscuring their agency and humanity while reinforcing perceptions of them as voiceless at best and less than fully human at worst (Van Loon, 2025; Malik et al., 2024; Callahan, 2019).

Eleven individuals currently experiencing houselessness were interviewed; nine were living outdoors at the time of the interviews.¹¹⁸ This included someone who had just returned to Seattle after living in recovery housing in Canada and was headed to stay with friends in an encampment, as well as an individual who had recently completed a prison sentence and was living in a tent in Seattle's Queen Anne Greenbelt.

Of the two interviewees who were living indoors, one was in temporary housing, while the other had moved into a temporary shelter the day before our interview, following a stay in hospital due to an accidental drug overdose. At least two of the interviewees are U.S. military

¹¹⁸ Ten people in the Seattle area and one in Washington, D.C. Chapter 5 (Methods), provides further details. One interviewee in Seattle has since moved into permanent housing.

veterans. Additionally, this chapter includes insights from a twelfth individual, Sophia, who was once houseless but is now housed and working as an outreach worker and in a senior role for Facing Homelessness, a community-based nonprofit that supports and communicates the stories of those experiencing houselessness.¹¹⁹

The interviewees have collectively experienced significant periods of being unhoused, from a few years to over 20 years, with some stating they have lived outside for most of their lives and do not expect to ever have stable indoor housing.¹²⁰ One individual, Dylan, explained: “homelessness will always be here because some of us like me, I’m in this for the long haul, because they created me, the systems, they create homelessness.” Another interviewee stated: “I’m not fit for community living. I’m just not. So, it’s like, I’ve tried.”

Participants were asked to share their experiences of using public parks as shelters and for survival, including the amenities they found useful in these spaces.¹²¹ They were informed that this study focuses on the concept of care in relation to parks and recreation services and were asked whether they have experienced caring or uncaring behaviors while using park spaces. They were also asked for their perspectives on how park agencies might operate differently to better embody care and assist those who are houseless. The interview instrument is provided in Appendix C, along with a list of the interviewees in Appendix P.

¹¹⁹ <https://facinghomelessness.org/>

¹²⁰ For example, Ben said: “I’ve been on the streets since a juvenile, I went straight into foster care for a year and came back on the street.” Relik commented: “the streets are unforgiving, and I can say that because I’ve been on the streets for twenty years.” Jonnie shared that he was: “raised in Ballard and off and on the streets most of my life. Been on and off. I just got off the streets now and into a shelter yesterday.”

¹²¹ The interviews did not include questions about participants’ experiences using community centers, concentrating instead on park spaces. One individual mentioned that he does not use community center facilities because they are not open when he needs them.

The following sections explore participants' use of parks, including the benefits that parks provide as well as their attempts to remain out of sight, and the dangers associated with living in these spaces. They express their efforts to meet basic human needs, sharing vital priorities common to all members of society, such as keeping safe, warm, dry, and rested. Interviewees discuss the creative efforts they undertake to keep parks clean and sanitary, caring for and protecting the landscapes they use, while navigating challenges such as disposing of waste, all while trying to stay safe and protect their belongings.

The interviewees recounted numerous instances of being treated poorly while using public parks. They also emphasize the stigmatization they face due to being unhoused, the criminalization of their basic needs, and the violence and shock of being swept and losing their belongings in Seattle's parks. Instances of discrimination arose from encounters with SPR park staff and individuals involved in encampment removals.

Finally, participants share their aspirations for public parks that model an ethos of care, which primarily focus on maintaining cleanliness and ensuring spaces are accessible and open to all populations. Their aspirations align with the priorities expressed by the SPR interviewees in previous chapters. They reflect the unhoused interviewees' appreciation of the value of public parks, and their need for clean, accessible spaces. The similarities in perspectives between unhoused individuals and those employed by SPR might surprise some in the field of public parks and recreation. There is little communication between these two groups, which hinders understanding of how those experiencing houselessness view these spaces.

Benefits of Parks: “Safety Nets for People Living Outside”

Public parks are a key resource for the unhoused interviewees. Everyone interviewed, except for Joseph, used, or had used, parks for sleeping, cooking, and meeting their personal hygiene needs.¹²² They sought shelter from the elements under plants and trees and built fires to keep warm. Some participants knew other people living in the same park and valued this companionship. The interviewees also visited parks to relax, meet friends, exercise, and enjoy nature, which are common activities for all park users, regardless of their housing status.

Participants described accessing various important amenities in public parks, most commonly restrooms, water fountains, and grills. Jonnie emphasized the value of parks in meeting his daily needs. He regularly uses them to: “cook food in, shelter from the sun, shelter from the rain” stating they: “bring trees, help us breathe, exercise, and play, that’s what’s nice about having the parks.” He highlighted the importance of being near to nature (further discussed below). Although he recently moved into a shelter, he had frequently traveled between parks while living outside, preferring large spaces close to water, such as the Arboretum (University of Washington Botanic Gardens), Gasworks Park, and the Lake Union area. He also occasionally traveled from Seattle to nearby cities such as Bellevue and Mercer Island.

Interviewees also shared various wider benefits of parks, echoing sentiments expressed by the SPR participants that these spaces are valuable because they are free to access and “open to all.” Cole referenced Teddy Roosevelt’s appreciation for parks and nature, adding that these

¹²² Interviewees were not asked for their names or identifying information, though some shared details during our conversations. All names are fictional, except for one participant, who chose his name for this study.

spaces serve as: “the people's living room, so the people who have no place to go, have a place to go.” In this way, interviewees view parks as public goods. For example, Sophia emphasized that parks are: “safety nets for people who are living outside.” Sophia described her use of parks when she was experiencing homelessness. Like Jonnie, parks were a place for her to meet basic survival needs such as keeping dry and cooking food:

For me, as someone who has experienced homelessness and has spent a lot of time in parks, trying to find cover, trying to find a place to be out of the rain or the cold, or utilizing park grills. I used just to survive or eat (Sophia, formerly houseless interviewee).

Gasworks Park was the place that best met Sophia’s needs during her time experiencing homelessness. She lived in the park, either in her car or by creating a place to shelter among its bushes and foliage: “I always gravitated back towards Gasworks Park. And that’s the place I felt safest at that time.” She considered it her home because she felt safer there, partly because she knew other people living in the park. Sophia’s desire to reside in a place that feels safe (although she acknowledged that living houseless is fundamentally unsafe) alongside community is a basic human need, shared by all members of society regardless of their income level or housing status.

The importance of community was also emphasized by other interviewees. For example, Dylan recalled spending a lot of time in Ravenna Park, located north of Seattle’s University District, while living unhoused as a teenager. He described it nostalgically as: “such a thick brilliant park, that you would have whole living rooms of friendship back in there.” He no longer sleeps in this park as it stopped feeling safe due to the activities of other individuals, discussed further below.

Seeking Privacy: “I Like to Stay Hidden”

People experiencing houselessness are criminalized for trying to meet their basic needs (Roy, 2003; Mitchell, 2011). Those interviewed were aware of the critical importance of avoiding detection and remaining out of sight when using public parks for living or sleeping. They understand that they can be penalized for engaging in essential acts of survival in public spaces despite having nowhere else to go. The interviewees look for secluded spaces within public parks to live their lives and fulfill basic functions that those that are housed can do in private. A section later in this chapter also discusses the criminalization of those experiencing houselessness.

A major factor reported by seven interviewees regarding their ability to rest was the difficulty of finding a secluded spot to lie down, sleep, or simply spend time away from other people. For example, George, who lives in a park in the Queen Anne Greenbelt, noted the importance of being concealed among foliage for his privacy, allowing him and his partner to chill out and relax after a day at work. He mentioned he liked his current spot because it provides some measure of stability to their lives: “the city doesn’t bother us for the most part you know, because you do get swept, it’s bi-yearly or something like that.” The interviewees’ experiences of encampment removals are in a separate section below.

Relik said he liked his current location because it is quiet and near a little-used trail close to a locked gate for which he has the key: “where I’m at right now like most people can’t find me.” Other interviewees wanted to be somewhere secluded to stay away from “normal” park users. Ben remarked on the cognitive dissonance of seeing other park visitors and his awareness of how different his life is from theirs, saying: “It’s real weird with the parks because you got

two different kinds of people. You have people that are solidified. They have jobs, they're working, their life is fine. And then you have people with nothing."

Cole enjoys being in the woods and among nature, stating: "Anything with trees really, I like to stay hidden as best I can. Right now, I'm out in the open like in front of God and everybody, I don't really like it." He described being unhoused as "living in a fishbowl," usually preferring to remain out of sight to avoid being stared at.

Ravenna Park was favored by five interviewees due to its large, wooded ravine, which makes it relatively easy to find a secluded spot to set up shelter. Cole shared that he used Ravenna Park in his early days of houselessness:

When I first came out here that park was so overgrown with underbrush that you can get lost out there. You could live in that park, and nobody would ever see if you wanted to. And I felt that was the best thing for me at the time because I was just getting out of the military and my head wasn't right and I could go hide away (Cole, houseless interviewee).

Although none of the five interviewees currently live in Ravenna Park, they spoke nostalgically about it as a space that provided privacy and fostered a sense of community among those residing there. Dylan referred to others living in the park during his time there as his family.

Feeling Unsafe: "There's Never Safety"

Despite popular narratives linking poor public safety to houselessness, individuals experiencing houselessness are far more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general housed population (Lee & Schreck, 2005). Each interviewee recounted incidents where they felt unsafe or vulnerable while using parks or public spaces for shelter or their daily needs. Some

emphasized that the behavior of other individuals in park spaces made them feel unsafe. Others also highlighted the dangers associated with living outside in Seattle's parks, especially during cold and wet weather, and the hazards of surviving outside in a tent.

Individuals experiencing houselessness share the same concerns about their safety in public spaces as other park users. Like some SPR participants (discussed in earlier chapters), they feel, or have felt, vulnerable during the daytime in certain parks and spaces in the city. However, the unhoused interviewees feel particularly unsafe while using parks at night or as a place to sleep. They shared stories about the specific parks they considered dangerous and avoided staying in overnight. For example, Dylan explained he no longer sleeps in Ravenna Park because: "they've had satanic cults worshipping, got caught sacrificing Billy goats, have murders down there, had rapes, they've had it all." Relik described 'dead man's trail' in Ravenna, stating: "every time anyone's ever gone down there, they have found a dead body, no joke."

Other interviewees talked about feeling unsafe using any park at night. Dan noted that they could be: "full of creepy people," adding: "there's a lot of creepy shit that goes on at night around Seattle." Dylan shared that his belongings were stolen from his tent while he was sleeping in a park. When he was first houseless as a teenager, he avoided parks and slept in the doorways of businesses, believing it was safer: "than a dark crevice under a tree branch."

Joseph, who is currently living in temporary housing, said he did not sleep in parks because he found them unsafe, filled with: "broken glass and fights, it's no good." He did not use the park grills because he believes they are dirty, with trash and bird excrement. He was upset when we spoke because a porta-potty had recently caught fire in the University Heights Plaza

park, a space he often visits to meet friends and play basketball. He was disturbed that someone could have been injured, reinforcing his perception that parks are dangerous.

Relik described the risks of sleeping in tents during winter, particularly in parks with hills or slopes, and the hazards of wildlife. He explained: “it rains so bad that people have drowned in their tents.” He highlighted the importance of being aware of the plants and animals in these spaces, stating: “whether you’re in the park or not, there’s never safety as far as what nature is.” He also said he would never sleep in the Arboretum because there are snakes, giant rats “bigger than a football,” one of which is so large it is nicknamed Captain, as well as spiders “the size of my hand.” While likely exaggerated, these remarks indicate participants’ valid concerns about their safety in parks.

Tammy has lived in encampments within the Queen Anne Greenbelt for over a decade. Whenever someone new moves into the encampment, she takes the time to explain how to stay safe and maintain sanitary conditions. She takes pride ensuring that her tent does not smell, she does not go to the bathroom near her living space, and always digs a hole to bury waste in the woods:

These are the things you’ve got to know, I mean if you live outside and you piss and shit right next to your house, you will have flies and you will have vermin, and you will have all these things that you don’t want to live with! (Tammy, houseless interviewee).

It is not uncommon for tents or structures to catch fire. Two interviewees, who were living together in a tent close to Tammy’s encampment, revealed that they had been using candles for light at night. Recently, one of the candles had fallen over, igniting their tent. Fortunately, they managed to extinguish the fire and escaped without harm.

Tammy and Dylan emphasized the unsafe and intrusive behavior of some individuals who go into parks to harass unsheltered populations. Both expressed frustration with the activities of We Heart Seattle, saying they are causing stress in the unhoused community.¹²³ We Heart Seattle is a volunteer-led organization that operates in the city, removing trash from parks, conducting clean-ups in encampments, and sometimes providing funds to those experiencing houselessness to pay for a bus out of the city or for shelter. The organization is not affiliated with the City of Seattle; however, they regularly enter the public spaces occupied by individuals experiencing houselessness to clean, remove belongings, and dismantle shelters.¹²⁴

Tammy described an experience when she woke up at 7:30 am to find a member of We Heart outside her tent, picking up her belongings. She asked him what he was doing, and he replied that he was throwing away garbage. She responded that he should not be there, as encampment removal rules require prior notice: “I said there are rules. He’s like, “there’s no rules for this!” Tammy is aware that, because their camp is on a steep slope, specific procedures must be followed. She explained one SPR staff member had recently fallen nearby and told the member of We Heart: “There are rules out here, so you guys don’t get hurt and you’re not following them.”

The encounter escalated as the We Heart representative continued to remove her personal items from the encampment, insisting he was cleaning up garbage. She challenged this individual’s assumptions, asserting her humanity: “Don't tell me what's garbage and what's not. I

¹²³ <https://weheartseattle.org/>

¹²⁴ The website “We Heart Seattle Exposed” (<https://weheartseattle.exposed/>) was established by concerned volunteers to document the activities of this organization. It includes testimony from unhoused individuals and provides a way to report encounters.

mean, as far as I'm concerned, I've been told I'm trash my whole life. I still don't think I am." The sections below examine further instances of negative behavior experienced by the interviewees.

Stigmatized: "In Their Eyes I'm Gonna Make a Mess"

Individuals experiencing houselessness are frequently stigmatized as troublesome, reducing the quality of public space, for example, by making it dirty (Mitchell, 2003; Roy, 2003; Beckett & Herbert, 2010). Visiting a park to use its amenities or spend time during the day, common activities for the general population, can be challenging for the unhoused interviewees, as they may feel ostracized by others in these spaces. Some have experienced negative or threatening behavior from other park users, park staff, and the police. This has included park staff ruining or confiscating their food and asking them to leave the space.

Dylan described how people react poorly to his presence in the park, feeling that they find his presence an affront to their enjoyment of the space: "Well, this person's homeless in the park – they're interrupting my peace of mind and my happiness, and my child and I are in the park and blah blah." He recounted an incident at Gasworks Park on a warm, busy day when he noticed trash on the ground. He overheard a construction worker blaming the mess on unhoused individuals, which he found particularly unfair: "So we got all the blame even though the truth is everybody in the city, everybody in the world, is in the park, and it's being trashed!" He quoted a friend who described the state of being houseless as: "The newest n_____ in the world," I say it like that because of the people who were treated that way first were black folks. But the new n_____ of American society is all homeless people nationwide."

Relik shared his experiences of being stopped by park staff while trying to cook food on a park grill:

If it's a party or whatever. They're not gonna say much. But when there's just one person sitting there cooking. Oh, man, they don't like that. Because in their eyes, I'm gonna make a mess, I'm gonna make trash, I'm gonna leave it (Relik, houseless interviewee).

He described incidents in which park staff have confiscated his food or attempted to extinguish his fire. He found this treatment particularly unjust because he knows parks are public spaces meant to be open and available for everyone to use. He said:

I've had them like, put water on my on the fire. I've had them like, grab my stuff and start putting it in the trash, it's fresh food. I'm just like no! They're like, "we know, you're not doing a party". I don't have to be doing a party! This is a public place! (Relik, houseless interviewee).

Some interviewees try to avoid spending too much time in parks for fear of encountering police officers and being arrested. Cole mentioned:

Oh, yeah. I try to stay out of their eyesight as much as I can. And I still end up in their eyesight all the time. Because I'm homeless. That and because I'm well known. I've been out here a long time (Cole, houseless interviewee).

Relik listed the parks he avoids, stating:

Carkeek? That park you know you don't want to be homeless there. No. They will actually press charges as hard as they can too. It is a bad area. Golden Gardens, which is a beach, they don't want you being homeless at that beach or even any of the beaches in Seattle (Relik, houseless interviewee).

He added: "Anywhere past 145th, that way, you cannot be anywhere camping, they will arrest you. They will not let you; it's like a no camping zone automatically, they will break your tent."¹²⁵ Other interviewees also shared their understanding of which areas of the city to avoid

¹²⁵ 145th is the northern boundary of the City of Seattle.

and where it is relatively safer to spend time without attracting attention or being asked to leave. The section below on caring for parks further discusses the interviewees' efforts to keep the spaces they use clean.

Criminalized: “An Eyesore to You; It’s an Emergency Crisis to Me”

The interviewees discussed the criminalization of their basic human needs, such as sleeping and using the toilet, and the negative impact this has on their mental and physical well-being. They encounter difficulties in accessing places to meet their hygiene requirements and highlight the injustice of being penalized when they have no alternative.¹²⁶

Tammy expressed distress over the lack of public restrooms in Seattle, which sometimes forces her to use public spaces, and the dearth of places to wash stating: “nobody wants to smell bad; nobody wants to smell like piss.” Although she lives in a park with restrooms, they are often locked. She has tried to find alternatives, spending time researching facilities online. She mentioned finding a map of free public bathrooms: “King County says that they have 102 porta-potties and hand-washing stations. I’ve never found one. I mean, they actually have a map of them, but they don’t exist.” Tammy struggles to come up with the money to use cafés or other businesses, commenting:

Sometimes you can’t come up with \$3.59 to buy the cheapest thing to use the bathroom or somewhere you know? What do I do? And that just makes everything about a person lower, your self-esteem, the way you feel about yourself, looking somebody in the eye, you’re not going to do it now. You know, now you’re less than. That sucks (Tammy, houseless interviewee).

¹²⁶ The free shower program was identified by SPR participants as a key source of assistance for individuals experiencing houselessness, but in contrast it was not mentioned by houseless interviewees. The interview questions however did not include prompts that directly asked about the shower program.

She recounted an experience from approximately four years ago when she and other residents in the encampment tried to rent a porta-potty, pooling their resources to rent it: “All us homeless people got together for a porta-potty. Costs \$279 Just to have them bring it out.” The toilet was delivered, but they were unable to use it: “They told me they found drug paraphernalia and they came and took it the next day. They never took the lock off. They never give us our money back.”

Sophia expressed her frustration about the decline in free restrooms and the removal of seating in public areas, asking: “why are we becoming like this as a society?” She does not understand why people cannot sleep outside, arguing it is not causing any harm: “people are just trying to find safe places to be.” Dan echoed this sentiment, returning to his point above about parks serving as people’s living rooms. He asked: “how many people haven’t fallen asleep in their living room?” While he acknowledged that some rules, such as prohibiting drinking or drug use, are necessary in parks, he questioned why he is not allowed to rest in a public space. He stated: “I’ve been woken up getting kicked in the face by local police in the parks out here. You know? My only crime was I was sleeping. Like what the fuck?”

Ben, who has lived unhoused in Washington, D.C. for 25 years, also emphasized the injustice of the prohibition of sleeping in parks. He described being houseless in DC as being caught in “a war on the homeless,” citing hostility from downtown business owners towards those who are unhoused and use spaces near to their properties:

They make it a crime to not have what you suppose to, because you're homeless, you can't sleep in the park. It's illegal. How is that? This is God's earth. Most of the people are Christian that make these laws. I don't understand it. You're a Christian. You believe in God, but you tell me, I can't sleep on God's green earth. You make a law saying that it's illegal because it's an eyesore to you, it's an emergency crisis to me (Ben, Houseless Interviewee).

Chapters 12-14 on this study's three case study sites explore the potential role of public spaces as intentionally safe places for individuals experiencing houselessness to rest or sleep.

Encampment Removals: “They Take It All from Us”

The examples provided above illustrate the severe and distressing daily challenges faced by individuals experiencing houselessness as they use public parks to meet their basic needs. However, the most traumatic incidents reported by those interviewed related to the encampment removals, commonly called “sweeps,” conducted by the City of Seattle.¹²⁷ Eight out of the 11 interviewees had been swept, some violently and others without warning, in violation of the city's official policy on encampment removals (City of Seattle, Human Services, N.d.). This process resulted in the loss of their personal belongings as well as additional feelings of being unsafe in parks and criminalized simply for being unhoused. Unsurprisingly, these interviewees are angry and upset about their treatment. Like the SPR participants in the previous chapter, they emphasize the futility of these sweeps, as well as the injustice of having their private property confiscated while they occupy public space.

The interviewees expressed significant frustration not only over the occurrence of sweeps but also over failures to follow proper protocols. Some were distressed to lose precious items during sweeps. They are aware of the procedures pertinent to encampment removal. In the City of Seattle, the date and time of the encampment removal must be posted at least 72 hours in

¹²⁷ The City of Seattle conducts encampment “cleanups” also popularly known as “sweeps” to remove tents and other unauthorized structures from public land, stating “outreach and offers of storage and shelter are provided at all 72-hour removals” (City of Seattle, Human Services, N.d.). The unhoused interviewees report these protocols are not followed and this is confirmed by research conducted by *Real Change News* and *The Seattle Times* (Chapter 6).

advance, via notices placed in the targeted space (City of Seattle Human Services, n.d.). This notice is intended to provide encampment residents with an opportunity to pack their belongings and relocate.

Relik shared: “When I got swept there was no caseworker, like there’s supposed to be. They didn’t even post on a website, like they were supposed to. They had cops and that was it.” Four interviewees reported losing their belongings without receiving any warning. Cole remarked: “we got the parks and rec people who will steal our belongings without even posting anything.” He is tired of losing his items: “and going okay, well let’s try this again, and then start afresh and then lose everything. It’s tiresome.” He added: “It’s heartbreaking they’re doing it; they’ve been seen throwing people’s belongings away without posting, multiple times over the years. And it’s wrong.”

Ed also reported that park staff had removed his items: “They’ve taken my stuff. I leave for the day and come back, and stuff has been thrown away, disappeared. They take whole tents and sleeping bags and stuff. Just gone.” The interviewees indicated they comply with removals when properly informed. Jonnie had lost all his belongings about ten days before our interview, including his generator and the tools he needed to work. It was his first time being swept, and he expressed distress over the lack of prior notice. Had he known, he would have organized for help to move: “as long as it’s post[ed], you violate that, it’s your fault.” He is resigned to the fact that he will not be able to replace the items that were taken, which means he cannot work.

Ben, who is experiencing houselessness in Washington, D.C., complied with a removal notice after finding a warning posted on his tent. He made sure everything was moved to a nearby location, but he said: “next thing I know, they took it. That is a federal violation. You are

stealing my property that's in a public space." He was angry, stating that even his government-issued identification was taken: "They've been throwing away government documents, family heirlooms, pictures of people that can't get back. They throw away all your stuff in the trash without even going through it. Procedures say they supposed to go through it."

Dylan characterized encampment removals as a violation of human rights, labeling them as state-sponsored robbery and murder. He shared the dangers faced by people experiencing homelessness when they lose their belongings during winter:

Taking our blankets, taking our backpacks, taking our tents and taking the essentials, we need to survive through the winter. They take it all from us in the winter and they've done that for years. So, to sum it up in simple words they get away with murder, and they get away with necessities. They kill us (Dylan, Houseless Interviewee).¹²⁸

Cole echoed this sentiment by calling the sweeps theft: "quit stealing people's shit. Not everybody can afford to rent. Why the fuck are you taking their tent?" Relik described the sweeps as inhumane and illegal, questioning why it is acceptable to take the belongings of unhoused individuals: "A tent is someone's home. When you cut that tent, and you're not being welcomed in, that's trespassing. That's breaking property, that's destruction of property, it's personal property." He recounted the violence associated with an encampment removal, recalling a time when he was awakened at gunpoint in his tent by law enforcement: "We all got swept, cops put people at gunpoint at four...five in the morning. No reason, like nobody even told us we were getting swept." He understood that the police were armed due to concerns about potential trouble during the sweep, but he felt that this was irrational and inflicted unnecessary trauma on

¹²⁸ A growing body of research also shows the negative impacts of involuntary displacement on individuals experiencing homelessness (Barocas et al., 2023). Also explored in Chapter 3.

those present. He asked: “You’re waking someone up with a gun, like how would you feel if someone busted into your house and did that to you?” He stated: “I’ve been in war, and I know what war is like and so that’s the stupidest thing to use as a reason. “So we feel safe,” they’ll say. You just made someone else unsafe!” He added that he knows not to fight back, as it would likely lead to his arrest.

George commented on the futility of encampment removals, describing the process as: “throwing me on my ass.” Cole also noted the severe, debilitating impact that losing essential items has on people’s well-being. He remarked on the futility of forcibly removing people from park spaces when they have no other place to go, highlighting the negative consequences of such actions: “What happens? They snap. “Oh, you’re going to jail, you’re going to prison now.” Well, that all could have been avoided.”

Interactions with Others: “They Don’t Care”

The houseless participants were asked if they had experienced caring or uncaring behavior while using park spaces. Aside from their experiences with encampment removals, only a few shared examples of their interactions with SPR staff, other park users, or local community members. These interactions were a mix of positive and negative encounters. Interviewees reported that some SPR staff demonstrated care for them, while others experienced poor behavior from park employees. Three participants were suspicious of SPR staff associating them with enforcement-oriented activities, such as being asked to leave a park or being given a Park Exclusion Order. However, most interactions with SPR staff described by unhoused interviewees involved the interviewees helping to clean park spaces, hoping this would earn them respect from the staff and result in a longer stay in the park.

The overall lack of interaction with others in public parks may indicate that the unhoused interviewees are not seeking wider connections. Possible reasons for this reluctance may stem from the factors discussed above: a desire to avoid drawing attention to themselves and to keep out of the way, or a belief that others view them negatively due to their status as unhoused individuals. Furthermore, the spaces being used by the unhoused participants are not regularly activated. They are located outside of downtown Seattle and are not staffed by the Park Concierges, who frequently interact with the individuals using their parks (discussed in Chapter 8).

Some participants expressed skepticism about whether anyone working in a public park would care about them or others experiencing houselessness. Joseph questioned: “why would they fucking care about? They don’t give a shit about me.” He added: “these people would try to get us; oh they got [to] clean this up.” Relik remarked: “They don’t care, and they don’t want to help half the time, a lot of people I’ve met through parks and rec have always done this whole thing of like, they think they’re better than homeless people.” As also discussed above, Joseph, Cole, and Relik recounted negative encounters with park staff and were suspicious of them, associating SPR with encampment removals and the loss of their belongings. Cole criticized the behavior of park staff, stating: “They try to be cops when they’re not, they’re Parks. They’re not law enforcement of any kind. They shouldn’t be acting like it.”

In contrast, Tammy has lived in the Queen Anne Greenbelt for over a decade and actively engages with park staff, greeting anyone new to the space: “they all know me.” She tries to keep the encampment clean, believing her efforts are appreciated because their camp has not been swept in quite some time, which is unusual for the area. Tammy shared her positive experience

with a SPR staff member. Following the recent death of her son, an employee of the Parks Department has regularly walked over to the encampment to check on her: “He’s probably been up here ten times just to say “You okay? You eating today? You gotten out of bed today?” This wasn’t the first time the park staff had checked on her. She explained that after a violent incident in the encampment: “They came and checked on us for three solid weeks. “You girls okay? You girls alright? You girls have any problems last night?” I mean, really walked down for us.”

Similarly, Sophia and Jonnie described developing reciprocal relationships with park staff, believing this protected them from being swept. Jonnie, who lived in the same park space for 15 years, emphasized the importance of keeping spaces clean, believing this earned him respect from park staff and helped protect him from removal: “I put my work in, I clean up, I take care of stuff, and I earn my respect.”

While living in Gasworks Park, Sophia developed a good relationship with the staff who worked there cleaning in the mornings. She described them as kind to those experiencing houselessness. At night, the park was frequently used for parties by teenagers and other groups of people. Sophia and others living in the space would help clear the trash left by partygoers. The park staff thanked them and appeared grateful for their assistance. Sophia believed these relationships helped shield them from removal: “I do think because of those relationships we had with them, and how much we helped out in that area at that time, that’s why we didn’t have cops or sweeps happening at the park.” Sophia also noted that the actions of the unhoused community in helping park staff are rational; after all, no one (regardless of housing status) wants to live in an unclean environment. These efforts to keep spaces clean are further discussed below.

Caring for Parks: “I Leave It Better Than When I Came”

Reflecting the significance of public parks for their daily survival, keeping these spaces clean was a key theme in the conversations. Many of the houseless interviewees expressed a commitment to caring for the spaces they visit, with nine of the interviewees reporting significant efforts to clear trash and maintain sanitary conditions in the parks they use. These nine individuals regularly picked up litter, although they struggled to find appropriate disposal sites. In the absence of SPR’s support, they try various creative solutions to safely remove trash from their park encampments. The participants also highlighted the value of caring for park landscapes, echoing SPR interviewees in Chapter 9 who emphasized their important stewardship role.

Ed described his litter-picking efforts as “bushwhacking,” a term he used to explain how he maintains his camp. Cole highlighted his focus on picking up needles, especially in playgrounds, since he has children. He said: “get that kinda thing up and get rid of it so that somebody else’s’ kids aren’t in a dangerous position.” Jonnie and Tammy discussed the time and energy they devoted to disposing of trash from park encampments. Jonnie said that it is important for him to keep the parks he uses “clean and pure,” explaining that litter not only endangers plants and animals but also indicates that people are living there. He stated:

I leave it better than when I came as, so I can be picking up five pieces of trash or whatever the case is, so you didn’t know I was there you know. I stay out the way. Keep it as preserved as possible (Jonnie, houseless interviewee).

However, he expressed uncertainty about what to do with the trash he collects. Recently, he started sending photos of the bags of trash to his case worker, asking them to contact the city

for pickup. Tammy faces a similar challenge in disposing of trash. She used to bag everything and walk down the hill from the encampment to discard it in the garbage cans of nearby houses. She stopped doing this because “it dawned on me that's a bill that other people are paying. And I don't want to incur that on other people.” Now she uses the City of Seattle’s “Find It Fix It” app, carrying the garbage down to the nearest road and reporting its location instead of leaving it at the encampment.¹²⁹

Tammy’s example is an unexpected use of the City of Seattle’s app, which is more commonly associated with housed individuals reporting issues such as trash, illegal dumping, and houseless encampments. Tammy’s experience reflects the proactive and imaginative way individuals experiencing houselessness also try to keep their areas clean, drawing on whatever tools they can find to assist these efforts. These efforts are rational – clean and sanitary environments are essential for everyone, and especially important for those without shelter, who might also suffer from poor health and other physical disabilities.

Sophia also mentioned the Find It Fix It app in relation to trash and houselessness. In her professional role, she organized community cleanups in encampments, collected trash, and reported the bags for pickup via the app. However, she noticed an increase in encampment removal activity in the areas they had cleaned, realizing with distress:

We're literally causing these sweeps to happen. And we're like trying to do good things to clean up trash and whatever, to make their space more livable. But the thing is, there's no dumpsters for them. There's no garbage cans (Sophia, formerly houseless interviewee).

¹²⁹ www.seattle.gov/customer-service-bureau/find-it-fix-it-mobile-app

Five interviewees – Cole, Dylan, Jonnie, Relik, and Tammy - discussed the value of being in nature and the importance of caring for and protecting the trees and plants in park spaces. Tammy expressed her love for the forest, noting that she feels her best among the trees. She has built her shelter around a tree and described a recent dream in which the tree asked her to remove screws from its trunk. In the dream, the tree told her: “I don’t mind helping being your support for the shelter but the things that they’re putting in me hurt and I can feel it.” Upon waking, she promptly removed the screws. Cole spoke about “being at one with nature” and expressed his preference for living among trees. He favored the overgrown and wild areas of Ravenna Park during his early days of experiencing houselessness because: “it used to showcase what nature does at its finest.”

Relik, who is Native American, explained he sees himself as a guest in nature, emphasizing that nature is “part of who you are,” and should be treated with respect. He believes SPR should have a better understanding of the land sacred to local tribes, but he feels that SPR does not care. He criticized the proprietary mindset of SPR towards parks, saying: “they see it as “I own this land.” No, you don’t.” Rather, he stated, humans have a reciprocal relationship with nature: “people don’t realize the land will give you what you need, if you allow it to.”

Humble Aspirations: “Just the Simple Services”

In the final section of the interviews, participants were asked for their suggestions on how park organizations could better focus on care and support for people experiencing houselessness who use, and rely on, park spaces. Most found these questions challenging to answer. To elicit further input, they were asked to consider what would be most helpful to them when using parks. Participants expressed humble aspirations, with some again voicing skepticism about whether

park and recreation agencies would genuinely want to assist them or improve the quality of amenities in the parks utilized by the unhoused. The interviewees' priorities for parks were similar to those expressed by the SPR interviewees in previous chapters, focused on providing high-quality, open, clean, and well-maintained spaces.

The individuals recognized that the park spaces they frequent often lack the quality found in other areas of the city. They would therefore like to see the same quality of amenities everywhere. For instance, Dylan remarked: "go further north, go further south, the park departments will have hand sanitizer and open bathrooms." In contrast, he noted: "we don't get bathrooms, rights to have soap." Ed noted that he had observed water fountains in parks, but they were often nonfunctional.¹³⁰

Relik feels that SPR deliberately neglects areas used by the houseless.¹³¹ He expressed frustration over locked or unclean bathrooms, asserting that maintaining these facilities is a basic responsibility of park staff: "you keeping that locked or just not cleaning that for whatever your excuse is, you shouldn't have a job." He highlighted the impact on the quality of life of individuals experiencing houselessness when they cannot access locked facilities or must use

¹³⁰ Routine winter preparation by SPR includes turning off water fountains and closing park bathrooms (Hirsch, 2025). This has a negative impact on the individuals experiencing houselessness that are reliant on these facilities.

¹³¹ Ben, an interviewee experiencing houselessness in Washington, D.C. also commented on these quality differences. He compared the quality of McPherson Square in Washington, D.C., to a nearby revitalized space, Franklin Park (also a case study in Chapter 14). He stated: "there's no bathroom, there's no clean-up crew, there's no beautiful flowers." He believes this discrepancy is intentional because McPherson Square is used more frequently by those experiencing houselessness, suggesting: "It's a park that they allow not to be maintained, not to be clean, so to enhance the penalties and enhance the finger pointing of the homeless."

very dirty amenities. In this way, the poor quality of places results in a poorer quality of life for people.

The decline in the cleanliness and availability of SPR's restrooms is corroborated by an audit conducted by the Seattle Office of City Auditor across a 12-month period from 2023-2024. The audit concluded that SPR does not meet its cleaning targets and faces maintenance backlogs. Additionally, its online restroom dashboard (also mentioned by Tammy) is inaccurate, with some facilities recorded as being open when they are either locked or inaccessible (Alderson et al., 2025).

Some interviewees defined care in parks as the maintenance of spaces and the provision of basic amenities such as bathrooms and running water. For George and Cole, park staff coming over to their tents to provide trash bags is a sign that these workers cared, George remarked: "Somebody used to come every day with trash bags, just trash bags. Seemed like they cared you know, even though it was trash bags." George stated that it would benefit individuals experiencing homelessness if park staff provided trash bags, mowed grass, cleaned the bathrooms, and ensured running water was available, describing these as "just the simple services." Tammy expressed a desire for a place to wash her hands, while Jonnie emphasized the need for drinking water, saying: "that would be a big one, I'm thirsty and don't have money to buy water." Both Relik and Cole wanted park staff to treat them with respect.

Finally, Ben, Cole, George, and Tammy believed that park agencies can demonstrate care by leaving the unhoused communities that use their spaces alone. George remarked: "I feel the less you see officials, the better I feel." Cole would like park agencies to consider his needs by allowing him to: "just to be left alone. I'm not hurting anything or anyone." For these

interviewees, care is being allowed to spend time alone in public parks without worrying whether their belongings would be taken or they would be asked to move. In this instance, therefore, care is the absence of action which would enable individuals to use parks like every other park visitor.

Summary

Public parks are essential resources for houseless populations, and the interviewees emphasized their importance for daily survival. Like other park visitors, people experiencing houselessness use parks to access amenities such as restrooms, grills, and water fountains, as well as a place to spend time, meet friends, and find respite in nature. The interviewees shared priorities for these spaces similar to SPR professionals and the general population which focus on keeping parks open, accessible, and well-maintained. The interviewees also actively work to keep the parks they use clean and sanitary, proactively finding ways to dispose of their trash.

The interviewees frequently find themselves in Catch-22 situations as they try to survive. They are criminalized for meeting their basic human needs in public spaces, such as sleeping and keeping warm, yet they have no alternatives. They are also stigmatized for making public spaces dirty, but they often reside or spend time in park spaces of poorer quality than those in other parts of the city. Additionally, the interviewees seek out parks that feel safe, aware of their vulnerability to crime because of their unsheltered status. However, the presence of unhoused populations is frequently associated with crime and concerns about the wider public's safety, (Lee & Schreck, 2005).

The participants understood that parks are public spaces and should be open to all and expressed frustration that their use is often restricted. Many shared their experiences of unjust encounters with others in public spaces, indignities they faced when unable to access amenities

that are supposedly open and available to everyone, and recounted distressing instances of violence or their belongings being taken in parks, highlighting the significant challenges they face daily in maintaining their safety and well-being.

As a result, some individuals invest significant effort in staying out of the way of the rest of society, keenly aware of which areas of the city to avoid and feel stigmatized and highly visible due to their houseless status. For some, the primary desire was simply to be left alone in public parks to spend time without being asked to move. The interviewees were knowledgeable about the rules and regulations concerning public park use in Seattle, especially those related to encampment removal. They were acutely aware of instances in which these were not followed, resulting in injustices that caused personal harm and placed them in vulnerable situations without essential belongings for survival outdoors.

Many focus on actions to ensure that park spaces are clean. They spoke about their significant efforts to be good citizens and keep park spaces sanitary. Some perceived this as a means of “earning” the respect of staff, which would result in a longer stay in the park before the encampment removal team arrived. These actions are rational, reflecting that individuals experiencing houselessness need well-maintained and accessible parks that can help them meet their daily needs.

The future aspirations expressed for park spaces were modest. Overall, the perspectives of the unhoused interviewees shared common ground with those of the SPR professionals examined in previous chapters. Everyone agreed that public parks should be open to all and emphasized the importance of well-maintained, safe spaces and facilities. The stewardship of parks to protect the quality of these spaces was a priority for all the interviewees. Additionally,

the houseless and professional interviewees expressed the futility of forcibly removing those experiencing houselessness from public parks.

The next chapter examines the key themes specifically from the Seattle interviews and their implications for public park management and recreation service delivery in the context of rising rates of houselessness.

Chapter 11: Discussion of the Seattle Interview Findings

Introduction

The previous four chapters presented the main findings from fieldwork conducted with 50 participants working or residing in the City of Seattle, including Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) staff and individuals experiencing houselessness.¹³² The fieldwork took place in the context of significant challenges facing Seattle. These challenges include a chronic shortage of affordable housing, growing income inequality, and a self-declared State of Emergency for houselessness that has been in effect since 2015. More than a decade later, this emergency has become almost a norm for the city, yet many responses to houselessness in Seattle's parks and spaces remain reactive, ad hoc, and crisis-driven.

The SPR interviewees clearly articulated the challenges and complexities posed by the rapid rise of unsheltered houselessness in the city, and the efforts they are making to respond to people's needs. They perceived care in the context of parks and recreation as involving activities that are central to their profession, and many are motivated to change working practices and implement new approaches. The primary theme among the SPR interviewees was a desire to shift from unplanned, improvised responses to more defined procedures and official policies regarding houselessness. One SPR interviewee described it as needing: "an admission that it is our problem. But it's not solely our problem."

¹³² The perspectives of one unhoused interviewee who resides in Washington, D.C were also included in Chapter 10.

Individuals experiencing houselessness emphasized the severe difficulties they face in trying to survive and being stigmatized and criminalized for meeting their basic needs while using public parks. Many interviewees, including SPR employees and individuals experiencing houselessness, provided suggestions on how public park and recreation services could respond more effectively to unhoused individuals using spaces and amenities for their shelter and daily requirements. They also shared ideas about the field's future direction regarding houselessness. The interviewees from SPR discussed a vision for the future that extends beyond the provision of recreational activities towards a broader role for their profession in providing place-based care and support for society's most marginalized individuals.

The SPR interviewees' hopes for future ways of working focus on protecting staff safety and morale, ensuring realistic workloads, addressing skills and capacity gaps, and better utilizing SPR-managed assets to support those experiencing houselessness. The interviewees experiencing houselessness shared common priorities with the SPR participants, seeking safe, open, accessible, clean, and well-maintained park spaces. Furthermore, both the SPR and houseless interviewees emphasized the futility of encampment removals, a city-wide policy that SPR plays a key role in, as well as the negative impact of poorly maintained parks and amenities, and concerns about their personal safety.

This chapter explores six themes from the interviews that have key implications for the role and responsibilities of public park and recreation agencies in the context of houselessness. These themes emphasize the commonalities between the SPR and unhoused interviewees, the need for clear guidance and policies regarding houselessness, public parks, and recreation services, and

the important tensions that hinder consistent responses to the individuals experiencing houselessness that use public parks and recreation amenities. The themes are:

1. The challenges faced by all interviewees regarding houselessness, and their mutual vulnerabilities and shared frustrations.
2. The common aspiration emphasized by all interviewees for high-quality parks and services.
3. The impact of the public park and recreation profession's "make it happen" mindset, which encourages flexibility and responsiveness in service delivery.
4. The need for clear guidance on roles and responsibilities regarding houselessness.
5. Differing understandings of what it means to be "open to all" in relation to houselessness.
6. Inconsistent care responses for unhoused individuals, often performed out of a personal sense of responsibility rather than a defined and planned professional obligation.

The findings from Seattle are relevant to the broader context of delivering public parks and recreation, particularly in areas experiencing similar problems and where residents face income precarity or houselessness. Each theme is explored further below.

1. Shared Frustrations and Mutual Vulnerabilities

Both the SPR staff and individuals experiencing houselessness described numerous instances in which they were placed in difficult and contradictory situations, articulating shared frustrations regarding the impact of houselessness on Seattle's parks and amenities. There is a mutual vulnerability; many of the interviewees feel unsafe or vulnerable in SPR parks or

community centers. Frequently, there is also a mutual uncertainty about the right way to respond or what activities might be allowed in SPR spaces. This is exacerbated by the lack of clear guidance and inconsistent approaches in different parks or amenities (both are discussed below). Both groups feel vulnerable, each in their own way, and share frustrations with the current situation and policies.

As the effects of deep societal structural problems and injustices manifest in park spaces and recreational amenities, the SPR interviewees report operating under conditions beyond their control, feeling unsafe in their parks and amenities, and experiencing a heavy emotional toll. Some participants used language pertaining to war, employing terms like “frontline,” “fighter,” “battlefield,” to describe their improvised responses to crisis situations related to houselessness, indicating they feel on the defensive. They expressed the impossibility of distancing themselves from issues related to houselessness, feeling a deep weight of responsibility to respond, yet also lacking the institutional scaffolding to respond adequately.

Derrien et al. (2023) note that a major stressor for land management institutions dealing with houselessness is the effects of an “unfunded mandate” (p. 958), resulting in staff working in reactive, ad hoc ways to address trash and human waste. This unfunded mandate leaves them with insufficient time to attend to other important duties. This observation was corroborated by professional interviewees in Seattle, who reported declining morale, feelings of futility, and powerlessness. A disconnect with upper management further impedes the ability to influence policy effectively, prompting some to consider leaving the profession altogether.

Individuals experiencing houselessness face the instability resulting from this lack of a codified response firsthand. All houseless interviewees reported instances of being treated poorly

while using public parks, and they often also felt vulnerable and unsafe in these spaces. These individuals use public spaces for their shelter and survival because they have no other options. They are criminalized for trying to meet their basic needs and stigmatized as troublemakers while lacking safety or stability in their daily lives. Some interviewees recounted negative experiences with SPR staff, associating them with the violence of encampment removals and the trauma of losing shelter and personal items. These unhoused interviewees expressed a desire to be simply left alone by SPR, skeptical that park and recreation staff would genuinely want to protect or assist them.

Many interviewees, both those employed by SPR and individuals experiencing houselessness, shared negative perceptions of the City of Seattle’s policy of encampment removals, which were widely viewed as harmful and ineffective. Most houseless interviewees reported that these removals violate their rights and often serve as a double insult due to the lack of notification prior to the scheduled removal and their personal belongings being taken. They described the violence associated with removals, their serious personal consequences, and their loss of dignity. One SPR interviewee noted that encampment removals are entirely at odds with their wider mission, observing that these removals place them in the role of “trauma enforcers.”

2. Common Aspirations for High-Quality Parks and Services

The interviewees shared common aspirations for parks and public spaces, focused on ensuring high-quality, well-maintained, and accessible parks and amenities. People experiencing houselessness use parks for the same reasons as other members of the community. They value clean, well-managed parks that feel safe, welcoming, and inclusive. The SPR interviewees strive

to meet these aspirations for spaces, although some unhoused participants emphasized the gap in quality standards between parks in different areas of the city.

Many of the interviewees emphasized the value of keeping spaces and facilities clean and sanitary, while also acknowledging the significant challenges posed by houselessness in maintaining high standards. The SPR interviewees expressed the emotional toll of seeing their parks and landscapes being damaged by individuals using these areas for shelter. Some reported feelings of low morale as they observed these spaces becoming degraded and dirty, while others felt distress over the destruction caused by encampments and emphasized their profession's important role in providing landscape stewardship. While they highlighted the long-term damage to Seattle's park environments they also felt conflicted about the best way to respond due to their empathy for those using these spaces as shelter.

On the other hand, the unhoused interviewees acknowledged they are aware of the damaging effects that their use of parks as shelters has on these environments. The houseless interviewees noted the negative impact of poor-quality parks and facilities on their health and well-being. Many therefore expressed a strong commitment to caring for the public parks they use, taking pride in keeping these spaces sanitary and recognizing the health benefits of doing so.¹³³ Some reported significant efforts to keep park spaces clean, employing creative, tech-led solutions to try and dispose of their trash in the absence of garbage collection services. They hoped that by

¹³³ Eleven individuals experiencing chronic houselessness, and one individual who is now housed, were interviewed for this study. This is a small sample and not representative of the broader houseless population in Seattle. It is impossible to determine if these perspectives and attitudes are true across the entire population.

showing they care and maintaining cleanliness in the spaces they use, they could be spared encampment removals or be allowed to stay by staff.

Individuals experiencing houselessness are significantly affected when essential amenities in parks, such as restrooms or water fountains, are closed or broken, and public facilities are of a poor quality. Some expressed the belief that the spaces they utilize are deliberately neglected, with facilities kept locked and park areas poorly maintained, or allowed to deteriorate. The lack of facilities to meet their basic hygiene needs impacts their dignity, with one interviewee stating that she feels embarrassed when she smells. The aspirations for parks expressed by those experiencing houselessness are modest; for instance, they hope for clean, open bathrooms with soap. Others reported a desire to use public parks that are maintained to the same standard as other areas of Seattle.

3. The “Make it Happen” Mindset

Key strengths of park and recreation professionals in their work include the priority they place on serving the public, and their appetite and ability to adapt services according to community needs. One SPR interviewee described this as a “make it happen” mindset. However, in the context of houselessness and high demand for services, this approach can also lead to stress, frustration and even burnout for park and recreation professionals, and it leads to uncertainty and inconsistent services for unhoused populations. Operating in a culture that sends mixed signals about their roles and responsibilities as SPR professionals, and towards the individuals experiencing houselessness using spaces and amenities, can place everyone in potentially unsafe positions.

Public parks and recreation is a multifaceted profession, encompassing a wide range of services and amenities that reach millions of different people each day (NRPA, 2023). Park and recreation professionals are skilled in working responsively and flexibly, taking a no “one-size - fits-all” approach to park and recreation management. They strive to deliver a mix of specialized services or programs. However, demand for park and recreation amenities in certain parts of the city already exceeds supply. This level of demand creates challenges in maintaining high standards and leads to the SPR staff feeling squeezed; they are responsible for safety, stewardship and service delivery, but lack the resources to address additional and specialized needs that continue to rise.

Maintaining harmony among the different groups sharing these spaces can be challenging, and houselessness is complicating the roles of park and recreation professionals. The interviewees report engaging in complex daily balancing acts to meet the varied needs of their communities while maintaining accessibility for everyone. Some interviewees highlighted a disconnect between upper management and those working on the ground in parks and community centers. These difficult balancing acts are not necessarily well understood by SPR leadership.

One individual compared working in public parks and recreation to being a “Swiss Army Knife.” They used this comparison because they recognize their profession does offer extensive value, but at the same time, they are asked to play a wide range of roles, have various skills, and offer many different services. As a result, they often feel overworked, expected to handle everything without additional support. Others reported feeling overwhelmed and asked to do highly specialized work, often without adequate training. For example, managing facilities and

handling crisis de-escalation simultaneously. Many SPR professionals indicated that they often resort to reactionary and improvised approaches to issues related to houselessness, frequently crafting solutions on the spot in response to urgent needs.

4. The Need for Clear Guidance

Park and recreation professionals are accustomed to working autonomously and adapting to community needs. Yet, without, as one interviewee put it, the “guardrails” of an agreed long-term strategic framework, many find themselves working outside their skill sets and knowledge bases. In theory, the profession is well-positioned to respond robustly to issues related to houselessness. In contrast, the fieldwork found that, over a decade since the City of Seattle first declared its housing emergency, the SPR interviewees feel underprepared, lacking a clear mandate, and an agreed-upon strategic direction, and unsure who to call when someone experiences a crisis in their spaces. Individuals experiencing houselessness who use public parks and recreation amenities bear the brunt of the lack of a defined approach.

There is no single source of guidance regarding public parks, recreation amenities, and houselessness in Seattle. Chapter 6 examined the City of Seattle’s responses to houselessness and the role of SPR in providing shelter during emergencies, offering free showers, and facilitating access to employment and housing through the Seattle Conservation Corps. Additionally, SPR enforces rules and regulations that restrict the use of their spaces by houseless individuals. In 2004, Seattle became the first city in the United States to incorporate considerations of racism and social justice into its municipal policies. Its well-regarded Race and Social Justice Initiative emphasizes the importance of race and social equity in city planning and decision-making, guided by the Racial Equity Toolkit (Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative, 2024; SOCR,

2024). Furthermore, Seattle's parks play a significant role in the Equity and Environment Initiative, launched in 2015, which outlines the city's environmental justice agenda (City of Seattle, 2015b). These areas of work are crucial to SPR's responsibilities relating to houselessness. However, there is currently no document that consolidates these city-wide commitments into a single source.

Shifting from unplanned, improvised responses to more defined procedures and official policies regarding houselessness would support the development of more careful and caring responses. A key tension reported by the SPR interviewees is the challenge of balancing their role as landscape stewards with the need to consider the needs of marginalized populations, such as individuals experiencing houselessness. It is essential to have guidance that explicitly recognizes and responds to these tensions and is supported by adequate staffing and resources. For example, some parks experience higher levels of use by individuals experiencing houselessness, making them more vulnerable to damage from being used for shelter. Clear guidance for these spaces could include specified actions aiming to minimize physical impacts, such as more frequent trash collection and increased grounds maintenance. Additionally, protocols could be implemented to protect landscapes from harm, such as improved signage, safety barriers, or increased monitoring of valuable habitats. High-quality guidance should also include supportive actions to address the needs of the individuals using these spaces for their shelter. Chapter 16 provides further recommendations that focus on clearly defining the mission of public park and recreation services in relation to houselessness.

5. Divergent Interpretations of “Open to All”

The SPR staff emphasized inclusivity as a bedrock of their professional identity, yet some are concerned that formalizing support for houseless individuals within their services could undermine their broader mandate to be “open to all.” The tension between theoretical inclusivity and intentional inclusivity emerged as a key issue during fieldwork, with significant implications for unhoused individuals utilizing SPR amenities.

The responses from SPR participants in interviews revealed their understanding of the complexities surrounding houselessness. Many recognize the humanity of those experiencing houselessness and are wrestling with how to respond appropriately while serving their wider public and acting as stewards of public spaces. The ideal that everyone, regardless of their life circumstances, should have free access to public parks and recreation amenities was emphasized by many interviewees, including those experiencing houselessness. Simultaneously, the SPR interviewees were concerned about the consequences of explicitly supporting individuals experiencing houselessness. They worried that their spaces and amenities could become overwhelmed, suffer damage, and deter other users.

Providing services for specific sub-populations has been an established part of public park and recreation management and programming since its creation. For instance, early public parks included extensive social programming for children aimed at engendering a better society (Young 1995; Taylor 2009). As discussed in previous chapters, contemporary public park and recreation agencies continue to provide programs and services for marginalized and low-income communities. These include provision for individuals experiencing houselessness, such as job

opportunities and support via the Seattle Conservation Corps, free showers, and overnight shelter during emergencies.

For some SPR interviewees, there is a gap between their daily reality of dealing with issues related to houselessness and their expectations for their role as a park or recreation professional. This mismatch takes an emotional toll, and a few participants are considering leaving SPR. They reported that they did not join the park and recreation service to deal with issues relating to houselessness. It is unclear whether those experiencing houselessness are perceived by these SPR interviewees as less deserving of park and recreation services or programs. It is also unclear if the reticence to focus on the needs of houseless parks users stems from a perceived lack of capacity to respond appropriately to this user group, or from a lack of desire to do so. This indeterminacy is a barrier to taking action and planning long-term, strategic responses to houselessness.

Those experiencing houselessness experience the consequences of this tension between theoretical and intentional inclusivity. These individuals report valuing parks for the same reasons as housed individuals, including the fact that they are public goods and free to access. However, they do not feel equally welcome in these spaces. They report that the spaces they do access are frequently of a lower quality than in other parts of the city (also discussed above). Furthermore, their use of public parks in Seattle is often restricted, most notably via the policy of encampment removal. Eight of the unhoused individuals have experienced one or more encampment removals in which many lost valuable belongings, with some reporting that they were violently forced to leave certain public spaces.

6. Inconsistent or Partial Care Responses

Finally, the fieldwork reveals that the public park and recreation profession perceives itself as inherently caring, thereby attracting individuals interested in serving and assisting others. Caring is integral to high-quality service in parks and recreation. However, with respect to issues of houselessness, the research found that acts of care are often carried out in an ad hoc, partial, or inconsistent manner, without direction or support from SPR leadership. Furthermore, these actions are often driven by a sense of personal responsibility rather than professional obligation. Additionally, the unhoused interviewees reported a mix of treatment by SPR employees, some had experienced care and support from staff, others reported instances of negative, enforcement-oriented behavior.

The SPR interviewees provided examples of caring and supportive responses, including advocating for vulnerable individuals, using SPR resources to meet their needs, and bending the rules to try and help people. Conversely, they highlighted instances where care is entirely absent, particularly in the context of encampment removals, or when different societal groups are prioritized. For example, when unhoused individuals experience crisis in parks or community centers and are asked to leave.

The interviewees described care in public parks and recreation as serving or helping people, welcoming and fostering relationships with the community, offering quality amenities and services, and protecting the landscape. The unhoused interviewees mostly provided examples of care that focused on ensuring public parks are of a good-quality and kept open and accessible. Most SPR interviewees believe that it is within their role as park and recreation professionals to respond to issues related to houselessness, given that they provide a publicly funded service.

However, they are uncertain about the best ways to assist these individuals. For instance, the debate over whether to provide additional support, such as laundry facilities, free clothing, or social service assistance, at SPR shower program sites is ongoing. Some interviewees question whether this program adequately addresses the needs of those experiencing homelessness.

Participants noted the public park and recreation profession's long history of supporting vulnerable populations and its current role in addressing community needs. However, despite the SPR interviewees' belief in their profession's commitment to care and some interviewees' interest in pursuing caring ways of working, it remains unclear whether SPR's management has the appetite to develop more support for those that are homeless. This ambiguity affects both SPR staff, who either lack the resources or skills to implement new ways of working or feel it is impossible without leadership prioritization, and the individuals experiencing homelessness who use SPR amenities. As a result, there is a patchwork of approaches that vary depending on the individuals working in different parks or community centers at any given time, leading to an unpredictable and unsustainable system over the long term.

Summary

The information gathered during fieldwork in Seattle provides valuable insights into the realities of public park management and the delivery of recreation services in the context of homelessness. These insights are applicable to any area experiencing rising needs and income insecurity. The fieldwork found that many park and recreation professionals in Seattle already provide care to individuals experiencing homelessness, though these efforts are often fragmented, unsupported, and crisis driven. Both SPR staff and the unhoused individuals

articulated shared hopes for park and recreation services, emphasizing a desire for safety, dignity, and clarity in future directions, and shared concerns about poor-quality parks and amenities.

While the field of public parks and recreation has the potential to play an important role in addressing issues related to houselessness, the interviewees struggle to reconcile traditional expectations for their spaces and amenities with the complex needs of those experiencing houselessness. Public parks and recreation centers cater to a wide range of individuals at various stages of life, and houselessness is making this more challenging.

However, with a clear mandate, adequate investment, and appropriate supportive structures, public parks and recreation could be key to facilitating stable, long-term care for individuals in vulnerable situations. The next section, **“Section III: Place-Based Care,”** focuses on place-based care approaches, practices located in and enacted through specific public spaces. Three upcoming chapters (12-14) examine examples of organizations that are implementing alternative approaches. These three case studies highlight public space management centered on care, emphasizing how stewards intentionally engage individuals experiencing houselessness and employ diverse approaches to provide practical support.

Section III: Place-Based Care

Chapter 12: The Cozy Corner Program, Freeway Park, Seattle - Caring and Inclusive Park Programming

Overview of the Three Case Studies

Three case studies of public parks located in the downtowns of Seattle (Freeway Park), Atlanta (Woodruff Park), and Washington, D.C., (Franklin Park), provide positive examples of how parks can be strategically utilized to provide park-based caring responses for individuals experiencing houselessness.¹³⁴ In each park, the example case study organizations are moving away from short-term, reactive approaches to houselessness in their spaces and responding thoughtfully to their unhoused visitors. Each of the three parks offers high-quality, accessible, and enjoyable environments for all visitors while implementing these changes.

These case studies were selected because they provide practical examples of alternative approaches of working within parks that are applicable to public park and recreation agencies. They demonstrate the value of park-based care and offer ideas of caring practices situated within and enacted through the parks. Their selection was guided by a literature review, which included an extensive online search for innovative park-based approaches to houselessness, alongside conversations with park professionals in Seattle and Atlanta.

First, the Freeway Park Association's Cozy Corner Program in Freeway Park was chosen following an interview with the Freeway Park Association (FPA), where they described their

¹³⁴ The study's lessons are applicable to any area with high unsheltered houselessness.

inclusive and welcoming park programming. This innovative program includes food, entertainment, and access to fire pits. The literature review did not identify any other programs similar to Cozy Corner. This chapter presents the Freeway Park case study below.

Next, the case study in Atlanta focuses on the supportive park-based outreach services provided by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) in Woodruff Park. In 2020, the Project for Public Spaces published a case study about a grant-funded partnership in Woodruff Park, which appointed a full-time, park-based social worker to serve vulnerable individuals using the space (Madison, 2020). This is the only park-based social worker identified in this study's literature review and is likely the only example of its kind in the United States. Although the initial grant has ended, ADID opted to continue funding supportive services for individuals experiencing houselessness in downtown Atlanta from its core operations budget. Chapter 13 examines the Woodruff Park case study.

Third, Michael Halicki, Executive Director of the nonprofit organization, Park Pride, in Atlanta, recommended exploring the innovative work by DowntownDC in Franklin Park, a historic space in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C. In this case, care-based park management practices are used to understand and respond to the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness by creating a welcoming environment and connecting them with supportive services. Further background research found that the DowntownDC Franklin Park master plan document emphasizes the critical role public parks can play in helping marginalized populations connect with support services (DowntownDC, 2023a, p. 42). Chapter 14 presents the Franklin Park case study.

The three case study organizations are not publicly funded municipal park and recreation agencies. The three park sites remain in public ownership and are governed by the rules defined by their public owner, but additional funding and staffing for the spaces, and alternative ways of working, have resulted from the involvement of the alternative organizations.¹³⁵

The Atlanta (ADID) and Washington, D.C. (DowntownDC) organizations are Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (See Figure 12.1). BIDs are privately managed but publicly sanctioned. They work closely with local businesses, private property owners, local government departments, residents, and other key stakeholders in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. The Freeway Park Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization responsible for the stewardship of Freeway Park and collaborates closely with Seattle Parks and Recreation, residents, private property owners, and other city organizations.

The three organizations work closely with their cities' public park departments but are also aligned with the interests of the businesses and communities in each downtown area (see below, and Chapters 13 and 14).

Figure 12.1: Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

BIDs are organizations that are privately managed but publicly authorized. They enhance city services by collecting funds from local businesses and property owners. The revenue generated is used for various activities, including capital improvements, public realm management, sanitation, and marketing campaigns designed to attract visitors and investors (PPS, 2009; USDOT, 2018). One advantage of BIDs is their ability to implement innovative practices and operate at a faster pace than local government organizations (PPS, 2009). However, since BIDs are privately operated, the privatization of the public realm has important implications for the accessibility for different visitors. This privatization raises important questions about how well these organizations' missions align with providing care, discussed further in Chapter 15.

¹³⁵ The public owners are Seattle Parks and Recreation, the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation, and in D.C., Franklin Park is owned by the National Parks Service.

All three cities have significant populations of individuals experiencing houselessness who visit the case study parks to spend time. This group includes those who are chronically unsheltered, defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as someone who has been living in places unfit for human habitation for at least 12 months and may also be struggling with other conditions such as mental illness or addiction (HUD, 2015, 2024b).

The rates of houselessness in each of the three cities are on the rise. According to official HUD point-in-time (PIT) count data, Seattle has the fourth-largest population nationally of people experiencing houselessness (16,868 people). A very high rate (58%) of this population is living unsheltered (HUD, 2024a; 2024b). Chapter 6 provides detailed information on the increasing rates of houselessness in Seattle.

Washington, D.C. has fewer individuals experiencing houselessness overall (5,616 people) compared to Seattle, but it has one of the highest per capita houseless rates in the United States (COG, 2024; Goldstone, 2025). Annual PIT counts record a 38% increase in unsheltered houselessness in D.C. since 2018. Moreover, in 2023, data collection by DowntownDC revealed that the average monthly number of unhoused individuals in their operational area increased by 36% compared to the previous year (DowntownDC, 2023b).¹³⁶

Atlanta's houseless population (2,867 people) is notably smaller than Seattle's and Washington, D.C.'s, but between 2023 and 2024, the number of individuals experiencing unsheltered houselessness in Atlanta rose by 41% (Partners for Home, 2024). This trend is likely to continue. Atlanta is the third fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States, and

¹³⁶ Up to 69 individuals experiencing houselessness, an increase from 51 the preceding year (DowntownDC, 2023b).

between 2010 and 2023, median rents in the city increased by 76%, placing severe pressure on low-income residents (Goldstone, 2025).

The three case studies offer practical examples of innovative park-based care approaches to park management and service delivery that respond thoughtfully to their unhoused visitors in this context. The following sections present the case study of the Cozy Corner Program in Freeway Park, Seattle.

Introduction to Freeway Park Case Study

Freeway Park is an iconic open space in the heart of Seattle's downtown. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is the first park built on a lid over a freeway - in this case, the ten-lane section of the Interstate 5 freeway, which cuts through central Seattle (Freeway Park Association, 2025).¹³⁷ The park is owned, maintained, and managed by the City of Seattle's Department of Parks and Recreation (SPR). Since 1994, the Freeway Park Association (FPA), a 501(c)(3) membership-based and community-driven nonprofit organization, has taken the lead responsibility in providing stewardship of the park.

The FPA offers support to individuals experiencing houselessness who frequent Freeway Park and attend its programs. This case study focuses on Cozy Corner; a free winter program held twice weekly by the FPA in the park. Cozy Corner is open to anyone and serves the needs of different park users by offering free lunches, hot drinks, and information on local social services, while providing comfort through fire pits, books, and live music. Sessions offer caring and

¹³⁷ www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm. Appendix Q provides information on the history and design of the park.

inclusive park programming by bringing diverse groups together to relax and enjoy the space on an equitable basis.

The case study draws on an interview with Riisa Conklin, the Executive Director of the FPA and Gabi Baptista, the (former) FPA's Park Operations Coordinator.¹³⁸ It also includes observations recorded while volunteering for seven sessions of the FPA's park programming.¹³⁹ The following chapter examines the Cozy Corner Program and explores the efforts of staff to create a welcoming and caring environment, including the provision of food in the park. The chapter also discusses the management of various behaviors during the Cozy Corner program and concludes with an examination of the challenges associated with delivering park-based support.

Freeway Park

Opened in 1976, Freeway Park spans 5.2 acres and stretches across a series of three connected plazas (Figure 12.2). At its center is a modernist concrete canyon waterfall, surrounded by concrete geometric block planters (Tate, 2001). Appendix Q provides information on the park's history and design.

¹³⁸ Gabi has since moved to a more senior position within another organization.

¹³⁹ Riisa and Gabi were interviewed together for 70 minutes. I subsequently volunteered four times for Cozy Corner and stayed for the duration of the program, noon – 2pm (January 2024, twice in March 2024 and Jan 2025). I also volunteered for three sessions of FPA's spring and summer programming (May 2024, June 2024 and September 2024). Gabi was present during these program sessions, and I made notes of our conversations.

Figure 12.2: Freeway Park Map



Source: Freeway Park Association, 2020 Annual Report

Freeway Park is visited by residents looking to relax, exercise, or walk their dogs, workers who eat lunch at the tables in Seneca Plaza, and people attending events at the nearby Seattle Convention Center. The Park offers a reprieve from the busy downtown core (Freeway Park Association, 2017, 2020). Visitors can find places to sit in relative comfort, and the plantings offer some shelter from the elements. The canyon and the areas underneath the park are sometimes used by individuals to spend time and rest.

The park is also regularly used by people experiencing houselessness.¹⁴⁰ During the fieldwork, people appearing houseless, sometimes carrying large bags or personal items, at times wearing torn or dirty clothing, regularly entered the park.¹⁴¹ They sought places to sit and rest in Freeway Park. Some individuals opted to sit in the nooks of the Canyon, possibly because these areas provide more privacy than the open park space.

¹⁴⁰ Chapter 6 provides information on houselessness in the City of Seattle.

¹⁴¹ This assessment was based on the fact they were carrying bags or personal items, and/or wearing torn or damaged clothing. I did not ask individuals if they were houseless although some people volunteered this information.

About a fifteen-minute walk away from the park, there is a concentration of social support agencies and temporary shelters such as the Salvation Army Jefferson Day Center, Seattle Union Gospel Mission, and the Chief Seattle Club. Riisa Conklin, FPA Executive Director, described Freeway Park as being of value for unhoused individuals as a “day area” because: “We have so many social services in our catchment area and a lot of folks sleep at the library, a lot of folks sleep on town hall’s front porch. And Freeway Park is kind of their day area.” Gabi Baptista, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, added that the park is a useful space for people to spend time between meals and before the nearby shelters open for the night:

I know some folks who will come to the park, but they have somewhere where they can stay for the night, they just like to come to the park or they’ll come for a couple of hours leave to go to a nearby shelter for lunch or dinner (Gabi Baptista, FPA Park Operations Coordinator).

Stewardship of the Park

The formal steward of the park is the Freeway Park Association (FPA), which comprises community members, volunteers, board members, and a small body of around four staff (FPA, n.d.).¹⁴² Contracted by SPR as an “Urban Parks Partner,” the organization provides advocacy, fundraising, and activation events.¹⁴³ These include free arts, wellness and educational activities, such as a spring Equinox event, annual bulb planting, and movie nights. Additionally, they offer regular programming in the park, including Cozy Corner, which is the focus of this case study.

¹⁴² An Executive Director, Program and Engagement Coordinator, Park Operations Coordinator and Public Art Coordinator (FPA, n.d.)

¹⁴³ SPR contracts with organizations whose activities align with their mission. Their partnership with FPA includes a formal written agreement (www.seattle.gov/parks/about-us/contracts-and-partnerships).

The FPA also advocates for the park’s preservation and raises funds for the space (FPA, 2020). In 2024, over 4000 people attended the FPA’s free events and programs (FPA, December 4, 2024).

Following in-depth work led by the FPA to reimagine the space, the park is set to undergo a \$10 million program of restoration and capital improvements, funded by the nearby Seattle Convention Center (Seattle Parks and Recreation, 2020c). However, the project has experienced delays commencing, and, at the time of writing, is being reviewed for scope and timing. The first phase of proposed improvements will include a new four-stall, gender-neutral, staffed bathroom, along with improved lighting, new wayfinding signage, and improved planting (Seattle Parks and Recreation, 2025c).¹⁴⁴ The bathroom will be a valuable addition for downtown Seattle, which lacks restroom facilities, and provides an important amenity for visitors to Freeway Park, allowing them to enjoy programs and events comfortably. The first phase of improvements will be completed in time for the FIFA World Cup (June 2026), and FPA is lobbying elected officials to establish a committed timeline for these improvements.

¹⁴⁴ Likely to be opened by summer 2026. It will be operated by staff employed by the City of Seattle’s Department of Parks and Recreation.

Figure 12.3: People Eating Lunch in the Park (May 2024)



Source: Helen Beck

Care-Based Programming: The Cozy Corner Program

The Cozy Corner winter program aims to bring diverse groups of people together on an equitable basis to enjoy Freeway Park during the colder months. The events are free and open to anyone, including those experiencing homelessness. Participants can access free services such as sack lunches, hot drinks, water, and snacks, along with the option to borrow or purchase books from two book carts. The program also features live music through the Seattle Parks and Recreation Busker Program, and attendees can sit by two fire pits to relax and stay warm.¹⁴⁵ Blankets are available, as well as resource guides produced by the FPA, which provide

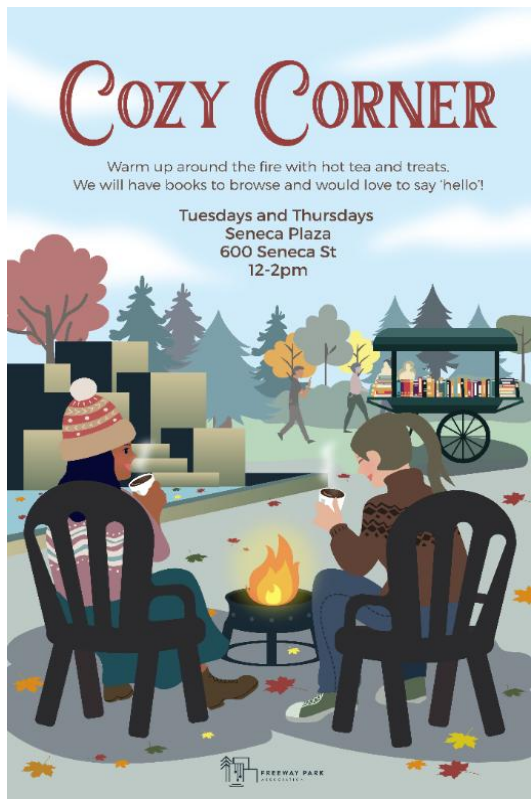
¹⁴⁵ www.facebook.com/SeattleParksBuskers/

information about local social service providers, alongside hand warmers and other basic supplies such as rain ponchos.¹⁴⁶

Cozy Corner is held twice weekly by the FPA. Sessions run on Tuesdays and Thursdays for two hours, from noon to 2pm, from October through the end of March (Figure 12.4) in Seneca Plaza, at the lower level of the park, near the fountains. Gabi, as FPA Park Operations Coordinator, was responsible for delivering the Cozy Corner Program between June 2023 – early 2025. She was present in the park during programming to greet people, offer refreshments and answer any questions. She offered individuals the FPA resource guides, and other supplies, as they picked up lunch. If someone in the park needed further assistance, Gabi would try to connect them with local street-level outreach workers (discussed further below).

¹⁴⁶ The guides use information from the King County Regional Homeless Authority and updates sent by service agencies and local organizations. They list shelters, day centers, food banks and places that offer medical care, needle exchange, clothing and services such as laundry, storage and identification replacement.

Figure 12.4: Cozy Corner Advert



Source: www.freewayparkassociation.org

Figure 12.5: “Social Services in the Park”



Social Services in the Park

- Tuesdays and Thursdays
- Located in Seneca Plaza
- Noon-2pm (weather dependent)

We are proud to provide nutrient rich lunches from FareStart throughout the Park all throughout October 2024 along with providing additional resources to the community.

We are so grateful to be a continuing resource for the entire community.

Source: Freeway Park email newsletter, June 5th, 2024

Approximately 15 to 25 people attended the four Cozy Corner sessions that I volunteered for. They comprised people who live locally, dog walkers, workers and individuals that appeared houseless. The lunches, drinks and snacks were popular, with hot drinks running out more quickly during the colder sessions. A range of people enjoyed the snacks and refreshments, but Gabi took care to safeguard most of the lunches to give to those she understands to be houseless. Some regular attendees would return unwanted items from the lunch bags to the snack table for others to enjoy.

During the sessions, people would borrow a book and eat lunch while listening to the music, others chose to warm up by the fire or doze in a chair. At the end of each session, Gabi would pack up the book carts and snack tables first, leaving the chairs and fire pits for last. When attendees saw her start to pack up, they took this as a cue to leave.

It was rare to see any trash left after the sessions; those who received the bagged lunches took care to clean up their wrappings. Gabi confirmed that she seldom needs to pick up litter following a session, observing that if you look after people, they often reciprocate. Sometimes, regulars helped Gabi move the chairs back to the storage sheds at the side of Seneca Plaza. Chapter 10 discusses the efforts made by unhoused individuals in Seattle to keep spaces clean and tidy, providing reciprocal care, and assisting those who are maintaining spaces.

Figure 12.6: Resources in the Park - Drinks, lunches, and live music (January 2024)



Source: Helen Beck

Figure 12.7: Resource Guide and Other Supplies (January 2024)



Source: Helen Beck

The FPA has a dedicated budget focused on support for the individuals attending their park programming, Riisa, FPA Executive Director, explained: “we have a budget line for outreach services. This provides funding to “buy emergency blankets, warmer hand warmers, Clif Bars” which are distributed during Cozy Corner (see Figures 12.6 & 12.7 above). In addition: “Printing these (resource guides), earmuffs, gloves, whatever we don't get donated we then buy so we have on hand. And we always have water. So, we have these big jugs, right? So, people can fill up their water bottles.”

The FPA also organizes a winter collection drive for donations of clothing and hygiene supplies, which they distribute in the park and during Cozy Corner sessions or other FPA events. Sometimes they receive an abundance of donations, and they will distribute supplies across the neighborhood:

People bring donations of knitted woolens, and like hats and mittens, and often handknitted, and blankets, and, you know, socks and jackets and all that kind of stuff that then we distribute in and around the park. And if we ever feel like we're getting a lot of donations, then we will take some of those to the neighborhood, to people who actually do have a wider reach (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

During our interview in January 2024, Gabi recalled an interaction with a park user earlier that day who asked for socks. She asked if he needed other items and he confirmed he did not have warm clothing: “So, I gave him jackets and gloves, earmuffs, some shirts, couple of pairs of pants, and whatever other little things we had, just make a little kit for him.” She noted that people are often humble when requesting supplies, not wanting to ask for too much, and she will double-check in case they do need more items:

They'll just kind of ask for like what they feel they need in the moment. But I always go out of my way to make sure like: are you sure? Like you don't need anything else? It's okay to say if you do so (Gabi Baptista, FPA Park Operations Coordinator).

Occasionally, the FPA hosts pop-up stands in the park staffed by social service providers, timed to coincide with the Cozy Corner Program. For instance, in January 2024 representatives from a federally funded program, the Affordable Connectivity Program (now ended), were in the park assisting individuals in gaining access to a cell phone or tablet and offering 12 months of free Internet (Figure 12.8).¹⁴⁷ During this session, people picked up their lunches and drinks and walked over to the canopy to learn more; a few stayed to apply for assistance from the program.

Figure 12.8: Representatives from the Affordable Connectivity Program (January 2024)



Source: Helen Beck

¹⁴⁷ www.fcc.gov/acp

Movement to Park-Based Care

The FPA's focus on helping vulnerable populations using Freeway Park as a site for support evolved over time. The park can struggle with a poor reputation (PPS, 2005), Riisa, FPA Executive Director, explained: "the problem with Freeway Park is that people's historical opinion or vision of Freeway Park is one of danger." When she first joined the FPA in 2011, the organization's culture was oriented towards security, with emphasis placed on enforcement activities. These activities were driven by the historical belief that Freeway Park had become unsafe, and anti-social behavior in the space was related to homelessness. She remarked:

That initial lens, that the Freeway Park Association was safety and security, means security officers and police officers in the park, regular rounds, you know, calling 911 when they see something that appears to be breaking the law. And that lens applied to people experiencing homelessness (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

Riisa and other FPA staff aimed to change the mindset of those residing near the park to: "remind people that this park is a gem." They encouraged people to visit the park to refresh their ideas: "I think people are really stuck in these old narratives about what the park was." They also focused on the low levels of reported crime. They started to discuss the opportunities that could arise from the FPA starting to provide support to the vulnerable populations using the park as well as ensuring safety. Riisa explained:

It was definitely a big shift to convince people to get behind this idea of safety and social services being really the kind of important combination that like when people who are experiencing homelessness or some other kind of crisis feel supported, and welcome. That's what creates this feeling of safety for everybody (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

They wanted to move away from calling the Police in response to issues relating to houselessness: “So instead of calling 911 on someone who's sleeping with their bags on a bench, you know, we instead have a system where we approach people, we offer them food.”

An important vehicle in encouraging discussion among their stakeholders was a regular subcommittee meeting involving FPA board members and representatives from the local community. Facilitated by the FPA, it focuses on safety and local services. The meetings include representatives such as the First Hill Improvement Association, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization that advocates for improvements to the nearby First Hill neighborhood, Horizon House, a local residential community for older adults, the Downtown Seattle Association, a local nonprofit organization comprised of over 1,100 members that focuses on the downtown area, Seattle Parks and Recreation and Seattle Police’s Community Service Officers.¹⁴⁸

During these meetings, the FPA advocated for a change in their approach in stewarding the park towards one that considers the needs of the vulnerable populations using the space. They invited a local individual, who had previously experienced houselessness, to speak at a meeting and started to invite local service providers, such as outreach workers from REACH, a social support agency, to talk about their work.¹⁴⁹ Riisa commented:

I wish I could recall, like this lightning bolt moment that it all kind of coalesced. But it was really a, I don't know, a fairly short evolution of pitching this myself. And the previous program coordinator just said, ‘listen, we feel like this approach needs to be much more focused on social services as a main focus of this committee, and we have

¹⁴⁸ First Hill Improvement Association: www.firsthill.org and the Downtown Seattle Association: <https://downtownseattle.org/about/>

¹⁴⁹ REACH (not an acronym) works with people in the King County area to provide outreach services, support in accessing housing, drug treatment programs, job training, and meet their needs to build stability <https://etsreach.org/>

like a charter and we have, you know, the whole the whole thing, and everybody signed on (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

Riisa described the change in the FPA's focus as: "a huge milestone for us as an organization." The new ethos also helped them maintain resilience during the pandemic: "it's helped us get through and navigate COVID as people experiencing homelessness have increased in around the park." She credited the FPA's fresh perspective on houselessness to members of her team wanting to honor: "a sense of empathy and attention to service in the public space." By challenging responses to houselessness in the park that are primarily safety or enforcement-led, the FPA has intentionally moved to incorporate support services as an essential part of their stewardship role, embracing this new way of working as central to their mission.

The FPA continues to collaborate with residents and local neighborhood organizations to explore alternative solutions to local houselessness and to challenge the stigma associated with living unhoused. Riisa commented:

Being homeless is not a crime. If you're experiencing homelessness, and so it's that has been a message that we have had to reiterate again and again and again when we get complaints from neighbors about people sleeping in the park (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

They have subsequently worked to establish connections with service providers and developed a model for delivering support to those who need additional help (see below).

Fostering an Inclusive Environment

The FPA's park-based care approach is rooted in a recognition of the humanity of those experiencing houselessness, and a key aspect of this is getting to know the individuals who

frequently visit the space. During our conversations, both Riisa, FPA Executive Director, and Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, emphasized the importance of building relationships to foster a sense of welcome and belonging.

Gabi highlighted her commitment to creating an inclusive environment for everyone, regardless of their life circumstances. She is motivated by her awareness of the stigma associated with houselessness and how this mitigates against unhoused individuals feeling comfortable using public spaces or feeling part of the community. She stated: “I want everyone to feel welcome in the park, no matter where they're from, or who they are. So that's important for me. I'm not going to treat somebody differently, just because they live out on the street or they have mental health issues.”

Representatives from the FPA walk through the park daily to build familiarity with the park's users. They pay attention to those who may need additional support, Riisa explained: “when I do my walks through the park in the morning, I make a mental note of who I'm seeing and where they are and what I imagine is their circumstance.” Gabi tells people about the park programs as she walks through the park:

I always let them know to come by on Tuesdays and Thursdays to [get] not even just the meals but also just to come in, you know, hang out and just relax. Because I'd say a lot of, there are some houseless folks, who if they're not living, you know, primarily in the park, might be living elsewhere. Oftentimes, I feel like they use Freeway Park as their like escape and just to be somewhere and I think because they know us and they know what we do they feel comfortable, and they feel welcome (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

Building her knowledge of the individuals regularly using the park thus enables Gabi to provide better support by developing a more nuanced understanding of their needs: “I'd say most

times when people come across someone in a crisis, it can be a little alarming and a little scary. But I think that's one of the great aspects of being able to connect with people in the park is, you know them well enough to know what will help them.”

Gabi’s familiarity with regular park users also informs her work during the Cozy Corner sessions, helping her to create a welcoming environment for everyone. During the sessions she greeted people warmly and this was often reciprocated. She asked visitors how they were doing, often following up on conversations from previous sessions. She reassured attendees that the lunches and drinks were free of charge and encouraged them to stay to enjoy them.

The Importance of Providing Food

The FPA believes it is important to include food as part of their programming, to address people’s immediate needs, and as a way of showing that they care. Riisa observed that they stand out from other public realm organizations, including Seattle Parks and Recreation, in offering free food to park visitors. She described their provision of food as a demonstration of love, integral to all their activation activities:

One thing that we've always done that I think sets us apart from other urban public space activators is that we always give away food. Free food is sort of one of our, like, food is love. Like we want to give food to anyone we can. So, all of our events always have very simple components, you know, free music, some kind of live music, some kind of art component, and free food (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

The lunches provided during Cozy Corner were funded by a Capacity Building Grant from the City of Seattle’s Food Equity Fund between 2023 and 2025 and supplied by FareStart, a

social enterprise (SEA Neighborhoods, 2024).¹⁵⁰ The grant covered 30 sack lunches per week, consisting of fruits, a snack and sandwich or wrap, and canned waters. The grant funding has ended for 2025, but the FPA intends to re-apply in 2026. In the meantime, their park programs provide snacks such as nuts, fruit, and power bars. Riisa observed that the FPA is unique among the Food Equity Fund grant recipients in providing food to unhoused individuals:

When we applied for the food equity fund, for instance, we were like the only organization applying to give food to people experiencing homelessness and most it was a lot of like, you know, early childhood education. I mean, wonderful, absolutely fantastic causes. But we were one of the only organizations, if not the only one, to really focus on this one particular population of people (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

The lunches serve as a means for Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, to connect with people in the park, giving her a reason to approach people and ask if they need any assistance:

So our whole thing is when we are actually out into the park, we hand off those lunches. And the lunches are available for like anyone, you know, coming through the park. But I would say oftentimes, I'm usually actively going out there and checking on houseless folks and making sure that, you know, they have what they needed, giving them the lunch or asking if there's anything specific they are looking for (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

Typically, all the lunches are distributed by the end of the second Cozy Corner session on Thursdays. If any remain, Gabi walks through the park to give them to individuals she recognizes as unhoused. Gabi felt that the straightforward way they provide lunches is an asset to the area, as it offers immediate assistance to people. She shared an example of a man who visited

¹⁵⁰ Established in 1992, FareStart provides employment skills and job training: www.farestart.org/

the park and mentioned he was in between travels and had very little money. He was thankful to pick up a free lunch.

During one spring session, a local worker walked into the park towards the end of the program and explained he had encountered a mother and child in the downtown area who were hungry.¹⁵¹ He remembered that Freeway Park provides lunches and asked if Gabi could help if he brought them over to the park. Shortly after, the individuals arrived, and Gabi quickly handed over the last remaining lunch, also providing extra snacks, and the FPA's resource leaflet while explaining when FPA programs take place.

The responsibility for food distribution in the park rests with the FPA. In June 2024, for the first time since 2012, SPR began including Freeway Park in their daily activation activities through their Park Concierge Program. A Concierge is now present in the park each weekday and conducts regular walkthroughs. The SPR Concierges that attend the park, and frequently sit close by to the FPA programs, do not distribute food. This falls outside of their rules of conduct and the FPA have been told this activity is not endorsed by Seattle Parks and Recreation. Chapter 11 also discusses SPR's willingness to support and serve houseless communities through the use of their parks and amenities.

Managing Different Behaviors

Freeway Park, like all urban spaces, attracts a diverse range of visitors and occasionally, the behavior of an individual or group can impact others using the park. In these instances, FPA staff use their judgment to ascertain how they might de-escalate a situation, drawing on their

¹⁵¹ May 14th, 2024.

training in de-escalation and their experience working in the park, or they assess where further intervention is necessary.

During her daily walks in the park, Gabi has become familiar with the challenges that some regular visitors face, and this familiarity helps her assess whether they need additional help. She gave the example of Joe:¹⁵²

Oftentimes, I'd say a majority of the houseless folks that are in the park are people we've been able to connect with, and to an extent, usually, on a name basis. So oftentimes, like if someone is having a crisis, like for instance, with Joe, he, I think even before I joined on, he was having quite a lot of like episodes, just yelling (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

By getting to know Joe, Gabi now understands: “that's how he is. That's how he processes his emotions. He's not bothering anyone; he's not doing anything.” Now if she sees Joe in the park:

If I ever am walking and you know, he's having an episode of crisis. My thing is just to say hi to him. Just make myself present. But also know that I'm registering him as a person. Like, I'll walk by and like, ‘Hey, Joe, how are you?’ And like, he'll just immediately stop. And he'll just say hi back (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

During one spring session, a young man displaying signs of confusion and erratic behavior entered the park.¹⁵³ He approached the book cart, where Gabi greeted him and explained he could take lunch, borrow a book, or use any of the resources available on the cart. She recognized him from Denny Park, a space in the central business district, although she had not seen him at Freeway Park before.

¹⁵² Not their real name.

¹⁵³ May 14th, 2024.

The young man took three lunches and initially moved away, over to the busker, but soon returned to take more items. He asked for money (which was politely declined) repeatedly picking up and taking things and replacing items. He asked if there were any comics and seemed disappointed that the book cart did not have any. Gabi observed this behavior and collected some of the items he had discarded, keeping a close eye on him as he wandered about.

Eventually the man approached people eating lunch at tables near the music and started taking things from their tables. He then returned to the bagged lunches and began emptying the bags onto the snack table. Gabi walked over and gently tried to engage with him several times, emphasizing that he was welcome in the park, but should not take other people's belongings. Unfortunately, he was not responsive.

Finally, the man started throwing items, including travel-sized bottles of lotion, into the bushes behind the people sitting at the tables. At this point Gabi decided to call Seneca Plaza's security team, feeling she had exhausted her options for engaging this visitor on her own. The security officer arrived quickly; the man noticed him and, without being asked, took this as his cue to leave the park. Gabi cleared up, salvaging the untouched, bagged lunch items and disposing of what had been spoiled. She explained her thought process behind calling security and the steps she took prior to seeking help. She felt she used all available resources but ultimately felt she could not allow the individual to stay that day:

I try to talk to alleviate stress, oftentimes people want to be listened to. I offer them resources, things to choose from. If I get to the point where I run out of things to offer...I don't like to call security and in reality, they can't be kicked out unless they are a danger to themselves or others. Often, it's about coming and being present (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

Seneca Plaza is routinely patrolled by a security officer every two hours.¹⁵⁴ She noted that, in this instance, the presence of the security officer triggered the individual to stop throwing things and leave. Calling for security officer backup is typically a last resort for the FPA, as they recognize the vulnerability of those experiencing houselessness if enforcement is involved. Moreover, despite serving a wide user group during their sessions, such incidents are infrequent during FPA's programming. Riisa, FPA Executive Director, reported they have called security out to the park around five times between 2023 and 2025, and one of these calls was unrelated to houselessness, rather it was a dangerous dog.

Gabi's approach to her role has evolved over time. Her main priority is to ensure that all visitors to the park feel comfortable and welcome. After a year in the job, she felt more confident in her judgment skills and ability to handle difficult situations while maintaining stewardship of the park. She reflected:

I compare how I am now to how I was last summer (her first summer in the job). I see differences in myself. With time I've been able to assess the situation more. And now I'm 100% comfortable in the park. Obviously, I'm going to care about someone, but I'm not going to be OK in allowing them to do what they feel if it's not safe or positive (Gabi Baptista, Park Operations Coordinator, FPA).

She recalled advice from another FPA colleague, which she uses as a rule of thumb to assess escalating situations, that when individuals impinge on other people's enjoyment of the space she needs to act: "This space is for everyone you included", but when someone acts negatively: "you're not making others feel welcome and that's not fair for other users."

¹⁵⁴ The EPA's Pacific Northwest office is in Seneca Plaza and as a result the plaza area, including the park, is regularly patrolled by officers from the Department of Homeland Security.

The incident occurred on a busy, warm day in the park. A regular attendee of the program observed it unfold, and afterwards we spoke about his experiences. He enjoys attending FPA's sessions because: "Gabi feeds a lot of hungry people...I like the nice workers. I like the book options, the music. Parks often have music, but this has extra. I like the scenery and how they take care of the area. And the history." He comes every time the program is on unless: "I'm working or sleeping."

He commented on the man's behavior, suggesting that it was appropriate to ask him to leave. He raised the idea of: "uninviting" people who make a mess, stating: "He should be uninvited throwing food, it's kind of messed up coming in and throwing trash. If you came to their house and did the same, they wouldn't like it." He proposed that the person should be asked to clean up, though he acknowledged that this approach likely would not have worked in this situation. He also expressed displeasure that some of the lunch food had been wasted.

I asked him what he thought about the idea of providing care for people in parks. He answered: "Like help, support? It's a good idea. Maybe that person today needed a conversation maybe before the food was thrown. You know someone's mad when they throw lotion! You gave him everything you had." We discussed the man's earlier request for comic books. Coincidentally, this attendee mentioned to Gabi that he could bring comic books he had received as part of Free Comic Book Day. He observed: "Maybe all it would take was some comic books!"

Challenges to Providing Place-Based Care

The stewardship of Freeway Park within the City of Seattle's broader responses to homelessness can be complex. For example, in June 2024, city authorities cleared a small

encampment in the upper area of the park following reports of open-air drug use. During the sweep, another small encampment was discovered in a lower area beneath the park. The individuals that had been using these spaces for shelter remained in the park, missing personal items which were taken during the removal process. Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, expressed she felt concerned while walking through the area, feeling a little unsafe: “I’m the face of the park,” she noted, adding: “I can tell people are bothered, you never know who makes these reports.” She wanted to ensure that people do not feel unwelcome in continuing to use the park but acknowledged the complexity of the situation and the limits of the FPA’s ability to fully assist the individuals affected by the encampment removal.

Finding help for vulnerable populations using the park can be difficult. For a period, outreach services in Freeway Park were provided by the Salvation Army, but at the point of research, REACH had taken on the contract which covers the park. Like the SPR interviewees in Chapter 8, Gabi reported finding it difficult to obtain assistance. This was due to the change in outreach contracts, as well as the general shortage of outreach support, and flux resulting from a restructuring of the agencies responsible for responding to issues relating to houselessness. Riisa explained: “There’s so much confusion right now, within social services of like, who is like what is happening with King County Regional Homeless Authority. KCRHA who is our kind of local provider.”

The unique location of Freeway Park – on a freeway lid – complicates matters further as it falls between two resource areas: the Metropolitan Improvement District and First Hill neighborhood. The outreach provider organizations that work in downtown Seattle do not appear to have the park as part of their defined responsibilities: “Freeway Park it’s such a weird space

because no neighborhood really owns us because we're over the freeway.” Riisa explained: “it's a constant battle to be like, okay, who's got Freeway Park in this scenario, though, like nobody is volunteering to take it on, we had to ask the Salvation Army do you have? Is this a place that you know about?”

Commitment to Building a Community of Care

The FPA is committed to providing park-based support for individuals experiencing houselessness as part of its core functions of stewardship, activation, and advocacy. Riisa, FPA Executive Director, stated: “if you work for the city, you are a public servant, you know, everything is tax funded. And that's everyone in our community.” She views the work of the FPA as rooted in the belief that: “we're also human beings who care about other human beings” describing their ongoing efforts as building a “community of care.” She added that although they were not originally working in the area of support for houseless populations they have adapted, recognizing the urgent need to do so:

I said that a minute ago that we are not social service. That's not what we're trained to do. But as I've learned in the last, you know, three or four years, we have to be in order to meet the needs of the people in the community. And I think when you're working in public space, you just have to kind of shift and change according to what people need (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

Riisa was initially concerned about asking FPA staff to interact with individuals experiencing houselessness, but her perspective has changed over time:

I think that was partially because of my reticence to ask my team to do something that we were not trained to do. But that has also changed. We've been able to seek out trainings and workshops to support our team members (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

FPA staff have accessed training via SPR in managing aggressive behaviors, first aid and mental health support. Riisa thinks this training has been very beneficial and is keen to find more opportunities:

The city, it has so many more resources, in terms of what it can offer their employees in terms of trainings and health benefits, mental health awareness and mental health days when it's like been a really tough week out there in the public space. They can really support their employees with a lot, so we're trying to communicate that as a partner to the city. We need those things too (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

The FPA's work is supported by the local community, which agrees with its focus. Riisa explained: "we need to remind ourselves that we are capable of making those changes and responding to community needs when we want to, and then generally, the population will support those changes." She noted the shift in ethos during her time at the FPA:

Just in my tenure here, seeing the shift of from like, my board, being able to talk about what we offer, what we give, how we host. Those are the words that we use now. Instead of like, oh, how we limit certain things, you know, instead it's what we're offering and giving. So that I mean, that's where we that's how we approach public space (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

Looking ahead, Riisa explained that the FPA's priority is to continue regularly activating the park and supporting those who use the space:

We have a funding issue this year, we had to kind of like, cut some things in our budget. But we decided to really just put everything into the foundation of what we do, which is being out in the park every day. Connecting with people making sure that that is all very well supported. You know, making sure we are still giving out food and providing these daily activations, we might not do as many big events like the big music series that we do and things like that, but we want to provide the essential services still (Riisa Conklin, Executive Director, FPA).

Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, added: “I'd really love if a lot of more other public spaces followed suit on what we did, just because I think they'd see the differences.”

Summary

The care-based Cozy Corner winter program in Freeway Park is designed to provide an inclusive, welcoming, and convivial environment for all attendees. It includes additional support, such as free food, access to fire pits, and information about local social services, to individuals in need during Seattle’s colder months. The program is part of the Freeway Park Association’s stewardship of the park and reflects the organization’s commitment to respond to houselessness with empathy and care, rather than through enforcement or safety-led activities.

The FPA prioritizes getting to know the individuals experiencing houselessness who utilize Freeway Park and aims to offer inclusive programming that includes provision to meet people’s basic needs while fostering a sense of welcome and support. The interviewees from the FPA view this as a crucial part of their role in stewarding the space. By implementing equitable park programming, they aspire for all members of the community to participate on an equal basis, regardless of income level or housing status.

Cozy Corner sessions are well attended by diverse groups of people, including those experiencing houselessness, who come together as one community to enjoy the park. These sessions are calm, entertaining, and positive, effectively using the park for activation and support. The inclusion of free food during the sessions serves a purposeful role, as the FPA describes this as a manifestation of love. This approach contrasts with the policies of Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR). Some SPR interviewees reported that they are reticent to provide food as part of their programs, for fear it will attract too many people to spaces – concerns that

have not materialized for the Cozy Corner program. This fear of being overwhelmed or negatively impacted by meeting people's basic needs in public spaces is discussed further in Chapters 8 and 11.

Cozy Corner offers important lessons for public park and recreation agencies seeking to implement care-based programming. Their approach is both replicable and attainable, using established techniques for park activation. The program successfully draws people to the park during the winter months, giving people a reason to stay and providing valuable for those that may be cold or hungry. By connecting to other programs in the city, such as the SPR's busker program and the City of Seattle's Food Equity Fund, the sessions leverage existing resources. Chapter 15 will further explore the insights gained from the case studies and their implications for care-based management and programming in parks and recreation.

Chapter 13: Woodruff Park, Atlanta - Park-Based Outreach and Care

Introduction

Woodruff Park is a heavily used open space in the heart of downtown Atlanta. It is owned by the City of Atlanta's Department of Parks and Recreation and is managed and maintained by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID), a Business Improvement District (BID) responsible for 220 blocks in downtown Atlanta. Founded in 1995, ADID covers 220 blocks of downtown Atlanta, spanning 1.7 miles and including Woodruff Park along with five smaller public parks.¹⁵⁵ ADID focuses on three areas of operation: promoting stewardship and public safety through the Ambassador Force, providing cleaning and maintenance services, and offering supportive outreach services to vulnerable individuals within the downtown core, including Woodruff Park, through the Supportive Services Outreach Team.

Regular visitors to Woodruff Park include a population of chronically unhoused people who frequently spend their days there (Madison, 2020). ADID's approach to public space management includes place-based outreach services aimed at local houseless populations, using Woodruff Park and the surrounding public spaces as a venue for engaging these individuals to provide care. Four Supportive Service Case Managers from ADID primarily work with those experiencing long-term houselessness to understand their needs, offering immediate assistance

¹⁵⁵ ADID was established by Central Atlanta Progress, a private, not-for-profit corporation formed in 1941 that continues to focus on civic planning and development in the city. More information: www.atlantadowntown.com/cap/about

and developing longer-term engagement to help individuals access housing, employment and other essential support services.

The following case study is based on five interviews with seven people as well as meetings with others familiar with the work in Woodruff Park (Table 13.1), field observations, and a background literature review.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, I gathered information on the delivery of supportive outreach in Woodruff Park during four conferences and seminars in which I co-presented with Nakasha Shoyinka, ADID’s Director of Supportive Services.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Chapter 5 provides information on the methodology and case study interviews.

¹⁵⁷ Park Pride Annual Conference presentation “Public Space and Homelessness: Providing Place-Based Care,” March 25th 2024, recording available: <https://parkpride.org/2024-parks-greenspace-conference-intention-to-action/> Two City Park Alliance peer conversation presentations “Addressing Homelessness in Parks: Providing Place-Based Care,” September 9th and 17th 2024, <https://cityparksalliance.org/events/peer-conversations/past/> . The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) annual conference, education session presentation “The Invisible Ones: Providing Place-Based Care for the Unhoused in Green Spaces,” September 17th, 2025.

Table 13.1: List of Interviews in Atlanta

Name and Role	Organization	Additional Information
Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID Homeless Outreach	Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID)	
Daryl Johnson, Director, Public Safety and Captain, Ambassador Force	ADID	
Three Supportive Services Case Managers, ADID Homeless Outreach	ADID	Spoke on condition of anonymity
Ansley Whipple, former Woodruff Park Program Manager (2017 – 2021)	Formerly ADID	Now Project Manager at Midtown Alliance
Michael Nolan, Team Leader Homeless Services	Intown Cares	Nonprofit providing homeless outreach and support services
Council Member Liliana Bakhtiari	Atlanta City Council	
Justin Cutler, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation	Department of Parks and Recreation, City of Atlanta	
Vanessa Miot, Community Services Associate and Torey Garrett, Project Manager	Park Pride	Nonprofit active in Atlanta

This chapter provides information about Woodruff Park, including its management and operation, as well as the work of the Supportive Services Team. It focuses on the provision of park-based care and support and the important role of Woodruff Park as a venue for care. The chapter explores how the team responds swiftly to the needs of people experiencing houselessness, while ADID works to address negative perceptions and the challenges this effort entails. It concludes by considering the value of providing supportive services as part of the management of public spaces.

Woodruff Park

Woodruff Park is the largest open green space in the 220-block area covered by ADID. The park was established through a donation from Robert W. Woodruff, a significant figure in Atlanta's history. It sits at the intersection of Peachtree Street and Sweet Auburn, key locations during the Civil Rights Movement (POND & MJM Management Group, 2020).

Opened in 1973, the six-acre park is close to businesses, hotels and it is within walking distance to the Georgia State Governor's Office, Centennial Olympic Park, and various tourist attractions. Georgia State University, home to 40,000 students, is located two blocks to the southeast, and there are two nearby MARTA public transit stations. The park offers a green lawn, two plazas, fountain, and a small play area designed to spell "ATL." The space also includes one of Atlanta's few public restrooms, a single self-cleaning stall located in the southeastern corner of the park (park images in Appendix R).

Woodruff Park attracts approximately 52 million visits each year from a diverse range of users, including workers, students, tourists and residents (ADID, 2025).¹⁵⁸ Its location near downtown service providers also makes the park a frequent destination for individuals experiencing houselessness who can spend much of their day in the park (Madison, 2020).¹⁵⁹

It serves as a crucial amenity for houseless populations, providing a space to rest, eat, access shade, use the restroom, and meet with others. Additionally, the park offers free Wi-Fi for all visitors and a games cart stocked with items to borrow that is open in summer (Figure

¹⁵⁸ Based on calculations that downtown is home to 154,000 jobs, 27,000 residents and 40,000 Georgia State University students

¹⁵⁹ Chapter 12 provides information on houselessness in Atlanta.

13.3).¹⁶⁰ Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID Homeless Outreach, explained:

Woodruff Park is a space where a lot of our individuals experiencing homelessness find shelter and when I mean shelter, they use it as either a day shelter or somewhere they can receive some type of service, whether it's a feeding, whether it's someone coming to have a church service, whether it's someone handing out water, clothing, anything like that (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID).¹⁶¹

I visited Atlanta twice in October, 2023 and March, 2024. to spend time in Woodruff Park and to conduct interviews.¹⁶² The park was busy during these visits with students walking through, local workers eating lunch in the plaza by the fountain, and people experiencing houselessness using the lawn and areas around the plaza in the eastern corner of the park to sit, rest, and talk with others.

¹⁶⁰ The Wi-Fi is sponsored by local businesses. Game cart is open June 1st through August 27th, weekends, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, noon – 5pm (www.atlantadowntown.com/woodruff-park/about/Amenities/game-cart).

¹⁶¹ Nakasha is not involved in the management of the park; she is the Director of the Supportive Services Team that works within the park.

¹⁶² I visited Atlanta Park and spent time in the park in October 8th – 12th 2023 (I also undertook the fieldwork interviews during this time) and in March 24th-25th 2024. Chapter 5 provides information on case study methodology.

Figure 13.1: Woodruff Park Map

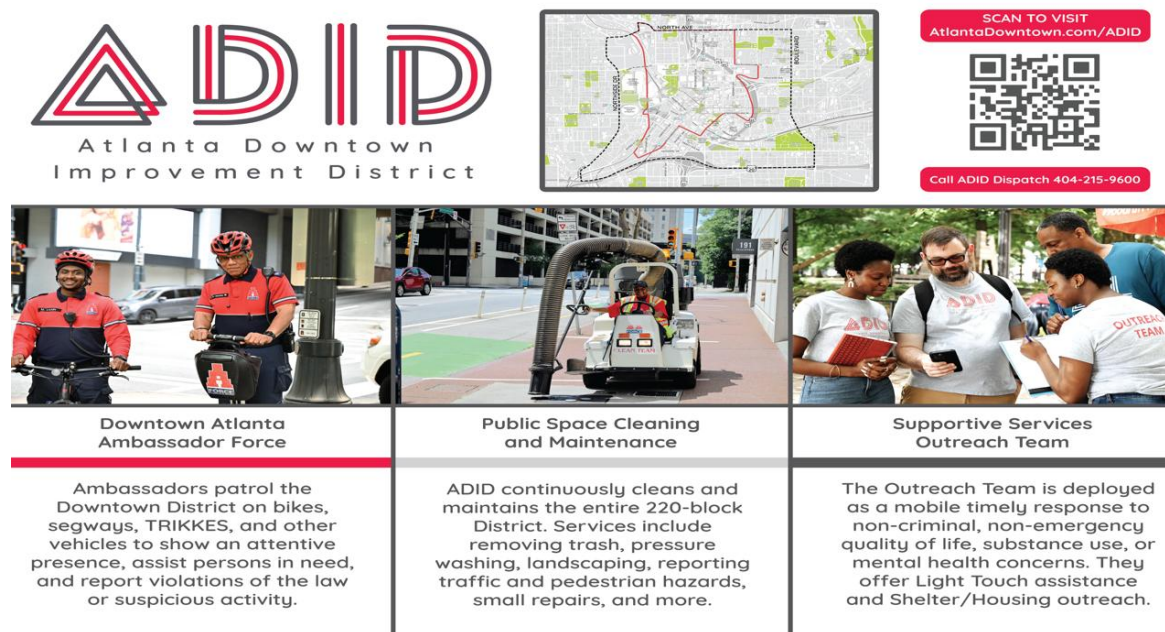


Source: ADID, 2025. Annotations added by author

Operation and Management of the Park

Since 2004, Woodruff Park has been managed, maintained, and programmed by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) through a Memorandum of Understanding with the City of Atlanta's Department of Park and Recreation (POND & MJM Management Group, 2020). ADID is a Business Improvement District (BID), which is a privately directed but publicly sanctioned organization. The Department of Parks and Recreation retains ownership of the space, and the park is subject to the city's rules and guidelines (ADID, n.d.).

Figure 13.2: ADID's Areas of Focus



Source: Shoyinka et al., 2024.

The Supportive Services Outreach Team

Founded in 2020, ADID's Supportive Services Outreach Team focuses on assisting people experiencing houselessness to connect with social services. Daryl Johnson, ADID's Director of Public Safety and Captain of the Ambassador Force, explained that the organization realized they needed additional skills and expertise to tackle issues related to houselessness in the downtown: "the engagement of individuals who are experiencing homelessness will require more expertise than we had as a public safety entity, which is why we created another whole area of operation." He added: "we just decided that it was necessary. It was crucial" and that ADID's approach is rooted in: "a permanent commitment to make sure we respond in a manner that's empathetic and compassionate and that also has resources dedicated." The section below provides more information on the background to the outreach team's establishment.

The team consists of four Supportive Service Case Managers, who work Monday to Friday from approximately 7am to 7pm, spending around 75% of their working day outside, assisting up to 10 clients each day and managing a minimum case load of 10 individuals. They primarily engage with people experiencing long-term or repeated episodes of houselessness, regularly canvassing the 220-block area covered by ADID both on foot and using the team's work vehicle.

ADID's offices are located directly across from Woodruff Park, and the Supportive Service Case Managers start their day there. Each morning, they walk through the park to look for clients, respond to dispatch tickets, and offer services to those in need.¹⁶³ Their area of operation spans nearly two miles, and their regular presence in the park helps build rapport and familiarity with the community. It allows them to identify new faces and enables individuals to approach them to seek assistance. Nakasha, Director of Supportive Services, described the park as the: "office space that we use to really help people feel safe," adding that an important factor in the delivery of care is: "they know where to find us and we know where to find them."

Nakasha joined ADID in 2022 to expand outreach services throughout downtown Atlanta, she explained: "the downtown Atlanta improvement district covers 220 blocks, so you can only imagine how many people are hiding, sleeping and are all around the nooks and crannies of downtown Atlanta." She described her team as: "small but it is very mighty, Case Managers are individuals who studied social work, sociology, psychology, any type of human services degree." All Managers have experience working in houseless shelters or mental health services. Nakasha

¹⁶³ Anyone can call the dispatch phone line to request outreach assistance. ADID distributes leaflets to businesses and other organizations in the downtown area to advertise this. Appendix R provides more information on the dispatch line.

emphasized the importance of compassion and empathy in each Manager, which is a critical quality she seeks during the interview process.

Providing Place-Based Care

A key focus for the Supportive Services Outreach Team is engaging with unhoused individuals to provide care within the locations these individuals already visit. Nakasha explained that her team's core approach is: "we meet people where they are." Team members will: "ask how they're doing, they ask them if they need anything, and they just try to build that rapport and build up trust so that if they do eventually need something, they're there to be able to assist." This engagement can take place anywhere within the downtown area: "They could be laying on the ground, they could be at a Starbucks, and maybe a Starbucks employee calls us. They can be anywhere downtown, and when the outreach team is out there walking around, they come across them."

The team's priority is to understand what individuals experiencing houselessness might need, and they work to build rapport to try to meet those needs. This assistance can range from offering a bottle of water, clothing, or hygiene supplies, providing information about local services, or working on a longer-term basis with individuals to secure mental health services, replace identification documents, access housing, or enter drug treatment. Case Managers can provide bus or train passes or call a Lyft to transport their clients to doctor's appointments, shower facilities, or job interviews. They also offer reunification services, in the form of a bus or

a plane ticket, for those wishing to leave Atlanta and return to their families elsewhere. Case Managers carry copies of a resource leaflet created by ADID, which is regularly updated.¹⁶⁴

The Case Managers conduct formal assessments with the individuals they engage to initiate the process of accessing long-term services such as housing or drug treatment. Once a Case Manager begins working with an individual, they can continue to manage their care in the long term, creating an Individual Service Plan with specific goals to assist people in moving forward.

The assessments conducted by the Case Manager take place in whichever space their clients feel comfortable. Nakasha emphasized that working with individuals experiencing houselessness in the locations they choose is crucial for making them feel at ease, ensuring their outreach services are low barrier to access. By meeting people in the park, or other areas downtown, the unhoused individuals don't have to leave their belongings unattended or travel to an office:

It's not that they need to take the person out of their element, take them to an office, sit them down, they ask them these questions right then and there if they're ready, willing to engage and have an assessment completed (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID).

Background to the Establishment of Park-Based Care

Efforts to establish park-based care and support for individuals experiencing houselessness in downtown Atlanta began approximately ten years ago. In 2016, Central Atlanta Progress (the founder organization of ADID and a key partner) collaborated with the Project for

¹⁶⁴ Also available: <https://ctycms.com/ga-atlanta/docs/spring-summer-sup>

Public Spaces to revitalize and reanimate Woodruff Park. This initiative led to two rounds of grant funding for park improvements in 2016 and 2018 through the Southwest Airlines Heart of the Community grant program. It also informed the subsequent creation of the Supportive Services Team and ADID's commitment to focus on the park's most vulnerable visitors as a core area of operation (ADID 2017, Madison, 2020).

The first grant from Southwest Airlines provided equipment for the park, such as chairs and tables, and updated landscaping and added a games cart filled with items for visitors to borrow (Figure 13.3). ADID hired a Woodruff Park Project Manager, Ansley Whipple (Woodruff Park ATL, n.d.), to oversee the implementation of funding. Ansley subsequently worked to secure a second grant in 2018, which funded a full-time social worker based in Woodruff Park on weekdays, 9 am to 5 pm, to engage with unhoused visitors as part of the park's daily operations (Madison, 2020). This was likely the first park-based social worker in the nation.

Figure 13.3: Game Cart



Source: Helen Beck, October 2023

Ansley described ADID's motivation for bringing a social worker into the park as redressing the balance within the space and bringing in a great variety of uses. In contrast to the concern expressed by the Seattle Park and Recreation interviewees in Chapter 8 about their spaces being overwhelmed by individuals experiencing houselessness if they explicitly provide additional services, ADID decided to bring in additional support to address these challenges:

The park had a reputation of being overrun by homeless people and not a place anybody wanted to go, and so, to me, it felt like an interesting challenge to try to be like, okay, well it's a public space, protecting the public space as a public space. And understanding, who can go there? What's allowed there? What do we want to encourage people to do there? (Ansley Whipple, former Woodruff Park Project Manager, ADID).

Ansley wanted to make better use of the games cart and had the idea of staffing it by someone skilled in helping unhoused visitors connect to support services. She described this as: “a way to offer people services in an incognito fashion.” She found support from ADID’s stakeholders, who were increasingly interested in alternatives to policing houselessness in the downtown area: “it was so easy to convince them,” because: “they were really excited to have in front of them a potential solution that was like a more positive thing that could potentially help people in the long run.”

ADID approached HOPE Atlanta, a key nonprofit that works with unhoused communities and whose offices are located across from the park. Despite their proximity, HOPE Atlanta did not operate within the space, Ansley explained: “there’s an issue with social workers being glued to their desks” adding:

There’s just not a lot of incentive to be out, go out into the public spaces.... they’re overloaded, their casework is so huge and so they’re trying to be as efficient as possible, but it misses a lot of people (Ansley Whipple, former Woodruff Park Project Manager, ADID).

In September 2018, a HOPE Atlanta social worker began work in Woodruff Park. During her tenure until early 2020, she connected approximately 100 people to permanent housing (Madison, 2020). Ansley described her work: “she was just incredibly resourceful; she went out there into the park and walked around the park and I saw her have a lot of success with getting people into housing.” Initially, the plan was for the social worker to be based at the games cart, but they quickly realized she would reach more people if she walked around the park.

Throughout her time at ADID, Ansley worked to boost park visitation while also focusing on ways to enhance the provision of services to the area’s unhoused population, believing that

these improvements would be positive for all park visitors. In common with the Freeway Park Association interviewees (Chapter 12), Ansley feels strongly that a space that is intentionally inclusive and welcoming is beneficial for all groups in society. She observed:

I could never prove this theory, but it was like if we made this a great park for somebody experiencing homelessness, it would end up being great for everybody. And that doesn't necessarily mean turn it into a soup kitchen, but just making it more comfortable, doing even more events and programs (Ansley Whipple, former Woodruff Park Project Manager, ADID).

She noted that when asked what they wanted in the park, the unhoused community expressed a desire for more entertainment and activities, just like other (housed) individuals: "they want to do fun normal things that other people want to do."

The COVID-19 pandemic caused central areas of Atlanta to become very quiet as visitors stopped coming, office staff worked from home, and the university transitioned to remote learning. Daryl, Director of Public Safety, explained that their stakeholder groups reported feeling unsafe during this time, concerned that the houseless population was increasing while outreach activities in the area were decreasing: "the optics was such that people would panic because they were like 'well all I see downtown is homeless people.'"

Consequently, ADID decided to expand their efforts beyond Woodruff Park: "We, as all business improvement districts, are very responsive to the needs of our stakeholders." They recognized the need to increase their presence in the wider downtown core: "During the pandemic, a lot of the organizations who were engaged in those services left the space and they were not available. And we didn't close down, we kept operating."

In September 2020, informed by a visit to Houston’s Homeless Outreach Team, ADID launched the Supportive Services Team.¹⁶⁵ Daryl commented: “Our decision to put our money where our mouth was in terms of saying homelessness is an issue and we actually diverted funds from other areas of operation to support that.” He added: “it’s not a grant commitment, it’s a long-term commitment to saying this is an issue.”

Woodruff Park as a Place of Care

Woodruff Park is a popular gathering space for individuals experiencing houselessness in downtown Atlanta, providing an accessible location where Supportive Services Case Managers can easily meet their clients, or connect with those in need, to provide care. For example, the tables and chairs outside the game cart provide a comfortable space for individuals to meet their case managers. Daryl, Director of Public Safety, highlighted the park’s significance for engaging with people experiencing houselessness:

Woodruff Park is kind of a captive audience when it comes to, you know, trying to engage homeless people. Because, you know, a lot of people frequent the park who are in need of services. So, if you're a social worker, or someone who's engaged in that livelihood, opportunities are pretty abundant and put in the park to engage people. It's kind of like fishing in a barrel (Daryl Johnson, Director of Public Safety, ADID).

Nakasha mentioned that interacting with and serving people in the park is the easier part of their work: “I would say the people part of it, walking the space, it’s great. People are funny, people are interesting, striking up conversations just to build that rapport.” The Case Managers gave an example of an individual they met in the park, whom they assisted in securing an

¹⁶⁵ Based within the Houston Police Department’s Mental Health Division, the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) provide street outreach services to the chronically houseless: www.houstoncit.org/hot/

emergency shelter bed and worked with to find employment. This individual is now working and living in more stable housing, they remarked: “you think a couple of months ago he was on the ground in the park!”

ADID is responsible for programming in Woodruff Park and its surrounding areas, which sometimes includes events aimed at downtown’s vulnerable populations. For example, in April 2019, they hosted the “Library on the Lawn” in partnership with the Fulton County Library System. This program operated from Monday through Wednesday, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm, providing park visitors with free access to laptops (ADID, 2019). In 2024, after a pause in programming during the pandemic, the Supportive Services Team hosted a Spring Resource Fair in South Downtown (Broad Street). The event brought together 17 service provider organizations to share information about local resources available for those experiencing houselessness. ADID reported on LinkedIn that the event served meals to 310 individuals and offered free haircuts for attendees as well as COVID-19 vaccinations (ADID, 2024).

Responding Quickly to Need

A key strength of ADID’s Supportive Services Team is its ability to place individuals experiencing houselessness into shelters immediately. Nakasha, Director of Supportive Services, has formed partnerships with the Salvation Army, Welcome House, a local housing shelter and The Gateway Center, a low-income housing development, to provide shelter beds and other social services. She observed: “by creating these partnerships it was easier to deal with individuals who are ready and willing to go to shelter.”

ADID pays to reserve a total of 24 beds specifically for their use, ensuring: “if we have someone who immediately wants to go into shelter, we have the ability to place them that same day, at least within the hour.” The 24 beds consist of 13 beds at The Salvation Army (five emergency male beds, five emergency women beds, one drug or alcohol rehabilitation bed and two-family rooms), five emergency beds at The Gateway Center and six single-room occupancy placements at Welcome House (Shoyinka et al., 2024).

Furthermore, to enhance her team’s ability to respond swiftly to people’s needs, Nakasha manages a budget dedicated to meeting requests, she explained:

I have a pool of money, for instance, called Client Support. And right now, we see a need, the agencies charge for washing their clothes, and people don't have access to laundry facilities. So why not use some funds to help them wash their clothes or just get certain things, work clothes, work boots, before they start the job, so that when they get their first paycheck, they can have that and save (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID).

In 2023, the Supportive Services Team engaged with 834 individuals, 164 of whom enrolled to receive ongoing case management.¹⁶⁶ The Case Managers successfully placed 133 people into interim housing and accessed support services for 165 individuals (Shoyinka, 2024).¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, 62 people received clothing, and 85 MARTA cards were issued (Shoyinka et al., 2024). The Case Managers also organized 82 Lyft rides to transport people to shelter placements or other appointments such as medical visits and job interviews (Shoyinka et al.,

¹⁶⁶ Individuals can receive support from both ADID and other social service providers in the city. They are enrolled in a database that all providers can access to see records of previous interactions and their Case Manager contact (if applicable).

¹⁶⁷ The total cost of the housing placements was \$100,000 (Shoyinka, 2024).

2024).¹⁶⁸ Since the team's creation, they have facilitated the reunification of 168 individuals with their families or other support systems (Beck, Mendie, & Shoyinka, 2025).

Looking ahead, Nakasha hopes her team can move to providing outreach on a 24-hour basis, which would enhance their ability to respond to people in need. She would also like to make greater use of the amenities in the park, once again staffing the games cart to offer entertainment while engaging with individuals experiencing houselessness visiting the space: “just being there talking to people, playing games with them, and starting that conversation; what do you need assistance with? And being ready to help them whenever they're ready.”

Challenging Negative Perceptions

ADID's approach towards unhoused individuals in the downtown area is based on the understanding that being unhoused is not a crime and that everyone's circumstances are unique. Case Managers try to approach people with respect and compassion, emphasizing the importance of a non-judgmental attitude and an open mind. One Case Manager noted: “everybody that you see on the street, they fall in a homeless category but everybody's story's different.”

The role of a Case Manager requires patience, and the managers are familiar with the unhoused individuals in the downtown area who do not want services. One Manager mentioned:

There's two guys that have been there since day one. We're all familiar with, I can go every day and ask as one of the guys is a veteran. ‘You want any help today?’ You change your mind today?’ Everyday ask and nothing changes (ADID Case Manager, Homeless Outreach).

¹⁶⁸ Total cost of \$1,500 (Shoyinka et al., 2024).

Sometimes individuals are placed in shelter by the team, but choose to return to the downtown area, and the team continues to work with them to find a solution. Nakasha, Director of Supportive Services, provided the example of an older woman in her seventies who was sleeping in Woodruff Park. Although the team was able to place her in an emergency shelter: “she felt so unsafe in the shelter that she came out and stayed in the streets until we found her housing.”

ADID actively challenges negative perceptions of the unhoused and the incorrect assumption that houselessness is inherently linked to crime in the downtown area, Daryl, Director of Public Safety, explained: “we have to untether that perception, that wrong perception that homelessness is synonymous with crime. It’s not always the case.” ADID’s perspective is: “this isn’t a law enforcement issue; this is a public health issue.” Nakasha explained: “I keep trying to get people to understand and to separate homelessness and public safety.” She believes that:

People care. They just misappropriate it a little bit and put it into public safety. And they're like oh, we need more police to police what's going on. And no, we need more people who are empathetic, who understand it and can assist and just ask questions to see what somebody needs (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID).

As Director of Public Safety, Daryl acknowledged the frustrations of local employers about houselessness in the downtown area, and the issues that arise from individuals sleeping or sitting outside their businesses, but he emphasized: “you can’t erase people,” stating: “we respond to behavior not optics,” adding:

You can’t arrest your way out of this, you know that being homeless is not a crime, managing the park, my park attendants and everybody who's in that space understands, we don't respond to a person’s situation, circumstances, or the optics, we respond to behavior, and we respond to disruptive behavior (Daryl Johnson, Director of Public Safety, ADID).

Challenges

Maintaining relationships and staying updated on the services and resources offered by other organizations operating in downtown Atlanta can be challenging. A difficulty that is also reported by the SPR interviewees and the two other case studies in this study. ADID is one of multiple organizations currently working with unhoused populations in the same space. Other organizations include outreach workers from HOPE Atlanta, Gateway Center and SafeHouse (nonprofits working in the houseless sector), MARTA (Atlanta's public transit organization) and the Atlanta Police Department.

The Case Managers noted: “just so many agencies that do what we go into.” Nakasha, Director of Supportive Services, observed: “there a lot of social service agencies in Atlanta, a lot! And a lot of people competing for money to help people.” She added that: “the hard part of it is the organizations operating in silos.” Sometimes, despite ADID's reserved access to shelter beds, they cannot meet everyone's needs. Demand for additional shelter often exceeds supply, particularly for women with children: “everybody's vying for those bed spots, so it's always competition, first come first serve.”

To promote information sharing, once a month, ADID hosts an Interagency Social Services Forum that brings together the agencies working in the downtown area. This forum is a space for service providers to share updates on funding, programming and events, and has helped cultivate connections between different organizations. By building and maintaining relationships with other local social service providers, Nakasha's team improves their ability to support individuals by providing up-to-date information on services available and the organizations best placed to help: “We find sometimes is we're not aware of what an agency can provide, then we

don't want to send someone blindly to go and receive false hope, so we try to form these partnerships and relationships.”

In addition to the social service agencies working in Atlanta's downtown, Woodruff Park is frequently visited by churches and out-of-town charitable organizations to hand out food and other items. Nakasha's team and ADID Ambassadors keep an eye on these activities to try to manage what is left in the space, noting: “most likely our team has interacted with one of those agencies that comes out to the park.” A key challenge is that some groups leave large quantities of food in the park, creating hygiene issues, and attracting rats. For example, during my visit, there were loaves of bread left by the fountain.

Nakasha pointed out that such actions are an issue for the park's cleanliness but also a disservice for the unhoused community, emphasizing the importance of connecting people to support services that address their longer-term needs. This highlights a challenge of care, also discussed in Chapter 4, where various interpretations or notions of care may contradict one another.

The Value of Care for Public Space Management

The establishment of the Supportive Services Team has enabled ADID to assist individuals experiencing houselessness in their public spaces in a systematic, structured, and planned manner, underpinned by professionals who are experienced in delivering social support. In contrast, interviewees in Seattle, as discussed in Chapters 8 and 11, reported that their attempts to help people in need were often ad hoc and reactive. This left them feeling vulnerable and uncertain about whether they were providing the best form of assistance. Chapter 16

explores the question of whether “anyone” can offer care to unhoused communities or if it always requires training and education.

The management of ADID understands the value of adapting its approach to public space management to incorporate a focus on providing in-house supportive outreach in the downtown area. Daryl, Director of Public Safety, commented: “I tell everyone, I don't know what we did before we had an outreach team, and that level of expertise in house.” He noted that in the past:

It meant making calls to an outside entity, and having them maybe respond, not knowing what the response time was or not having a status update on the individual, as opposed to walking across the hall and say, ‘hey, Nakasha the individual that you guys engaged to who, you know, frequents this store, what's the status update? (Daryl Johnson, Director of Public Safety, ADID).

He added: “I don't know how you do it without having someone who has some expertise in that area, you know, standing right next to you could tell you like, so what do I do next?” He spoke of the importance of growing their skills and knowledge to supplement their approach to public space management in the downtown, remarking that initially it felt outside of his wheelhouse:

My background, being in public safety, it's out of my wheelhouse, you know, you want to help, but do you have the expertise and the education to be able to help if that's not something that you've dealt with? (Daryl Johnson, Director of Public Safety, ADID).

Bringing in new expertise into the organization has also positively influenced others within ADID. By including Nakasha and the Supportive Services Team in ADID, Daryl explained that: “we’ve educated ourselves about what we’re dealing with, and that education process isn’t over with, it’s an ongoing process.” Nakasha and Daryl frequently communicate, and Daryl provided an example of Nakasha explaining service resistance:

From having her in here, we've understood that you know, that a lot of the shelters are not places where people want to be in and more resources need to be dedicated towards making the shelter's more attractive so that individuals will see that as an option (Daryl Johnson, Director of Public Safety, ADID).

Ultimately, the local business community has final say on the direction and focus of ADID's work, including a vote every six years on whether the organization should continue. ADID's provision of supportive services in downtown Atlanta has received high levels of approval from their stakeholders, who have appreciated the fact that the organization is proactively working to respond to issues relating to houselessness and is available via the dispatch line to attend to people needing assistance.

Daryl noted: "luckily I work in an organization that is progressive and forward thinking." During the fourteen years he has worked for ADID, they have worked to transform their operations: "from an enforcement heavy response," and he is grateful for the support of the local community. He noted: "I don't think it was a hard battle, to convince the stakeholders that this was a worthwhile expenditure. It was the right thing to do."

Summary

Over the past ten years, ADID has adapted its public realm management approach by exploring alternative responses to issues relating to houselessness in downtown Atlanta. Establishing a new operational focus, the organization has shifted away from activities grounded in an enforcement or policing-led perspective to a model centered on place-based outreach, support and care. They recognize that houselessness is primarily a public health issue and understand the value of reaching local unhoused communities in the spaces that they are already using. This way of working has found support among local businesses and other stakeholders

who have grown increasingly weary of short-term responses to houselessness and more interested in deeper, longer-term solutions.

ADID committed to hiring additional staff members that are specialists in meeting the needs of vulnerable communities and focused on assisting people by leveraging the public spaces downtown as venues for providing support. Woodruff Park, as the largest open space in ADID's catchment area, serves as a vital venue for the delivery of care. It offers a safe and accessible environment in which case managers work to engage with individuals, provide immediate assistance and build relationships that can lead to long-term case management and support.

By consistently being present in Woodruff Park and the nearby public spaces, the team has become familiar with the individuals experiencing houselessness who are regularly found in the downtown area. Over time, they have worked to build rapport with people and effectively respond to needs, including the most chronic and hard-to-reach cases.

Although ADID is not a public park agency, its approach offers important insights for the way public realm managers can move away from policing activities in response to houselessness. Public park and recreation agencies could adopt ADID's park-based care model by developing partnerships with local social support organizations that provide outreach services and inviting them into parks or recreation centers that are most impacted by issues relating to houselessness.

Park and recreation staff are well-positioned to communicate with other agencies about the presence of people in need within their spaces and amenities. They often know their regular visitors well and may already be familiar with their needs or life circumstances. By building collaborative relationships with outreach organizations, park and recreation professionals can

serve as key connectors between vulnerable individuals and social support services. They can play an important role in facilitating the delivery of care within parks and recreation centers.

Chapter 14: Franklin Park, Washington, D.C. - Caring Park Management

Introduction

Franklin Park is a historic 4.8-acre green space located in downtown Washington, D.C. It is owned by the National Park Service and managed by the privately-operated DowntownDC Business Improvement District (BID). Franklin Park has a substantial annual operating budget of \$1.29 million. While this level of funding for a single park is unlikely to be attainable for most public park and recreation agencies, the caring management practices employed at Franklin Park provide valuable transferable lessons that can be applied elsewhere.

Assisting individuals experiencing houselessness is a key organizational priority for DowntownDC (DowntownDC Foundation, 2024). Its management of Franklin Park actively focuses on understanding and responding to the needs of vulnerable populations who visit the space, with a particular focus on the chronically unhoused. Park staff prioritize creating a welcoming environment for visitors, allowing people to sleep on the benches, regularly checking in with individuals, and inquiring whether they need assistance. Franklin Park staff engage with people to inform them about nearby support services and can contact outreach workers to visit individuals in the park.

This case study is based on 11 interviews with members of DowntownDC and others familiar with the operation of the park (Table 14.1), my field notes, and a literature review.¹⁶⁹ Additional insights were obtained from a series of informal conversations with Cecily Mendie,

¹⁶⁹ Chapter 5 provides information on the case study methodology.

Franklin Park Manager, including at two conferences where Cecily presented her management philosophy.¹⁷⁰ Appendix S provides information on the interviewees, the history of Franklin Park and photos.

This chapter explores the care-based management of Franklin Park, highlighting the stewardship provided by the Park Ambassadors who work to ensure the safety and comfort of visitors. It examines the park's accessible programming and the proactive efforts of the park's manager to connect with social service organizations, as well as DowntownDC's efforts to humanize the experiences of individuals living unhoused. Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring the challenges associated with the work in Franklin Park.

¹⁷⁰ Park Pride Annual Conference presentation “Public Space and Homelessness: Providing Place-Based Care”, March 25th 2024, recording available: <https://parkpride.org/2024-parks-greenspace-conference-intention-to-action/> and The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) annual conference, education session presentation “The Invisible Ones: Providing Place-Based Care for the Unhoused in Green Spaces,” September 17th 2025.

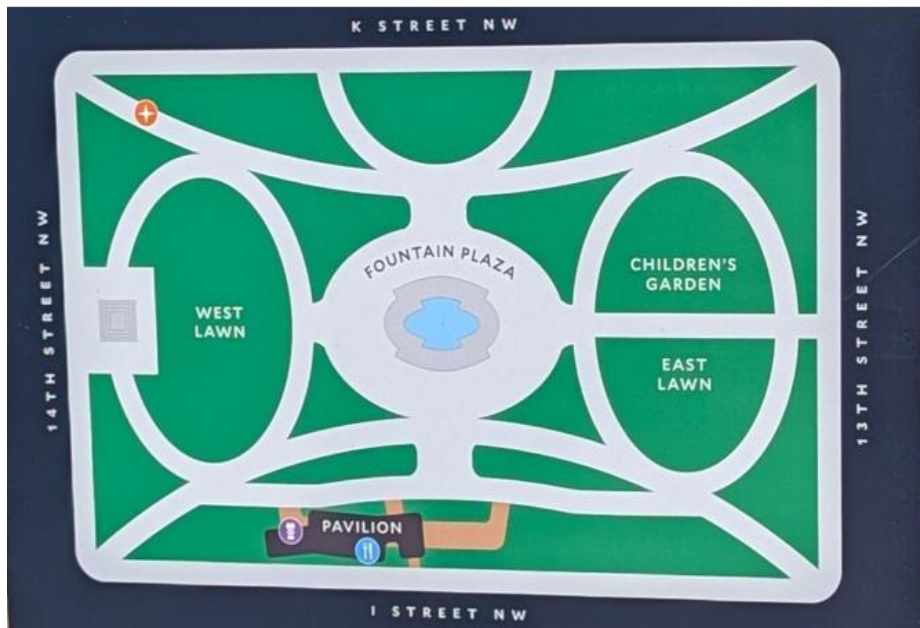
Table 14.1: List of Interviews in Washington, D.C.

Name and Role	Organization	Additional Notes
Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager	DowntownDC	Before joining DowntownDC, Cecily worked for the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation for 17 years.
Rachel Hartman, Executive Director and Chief Strategy Officer	DowntownDC	
Lukas Umana, Director of Public Space Operations	DowntownDC	
Ellouise Johnson, Senior Operations and Logistics Manager	DowntownDC	
Rene Diaz-Morales, Franklin Park Supervisor	DowntownDC	Known as Diaz
Lashawn Hawkins, Park Ambassador	DowntownDC	
Lasheia Walker, Park Ambassador	DowntownDC	
Michael Bunn, Interim Operations Manager	DowntownDC	Works at the Downtown Day (Homeless) Services Center
Homeless Outreach Officer	D.C. Metropolitan Police Department	Spoke on condition of anonymity
Ami Angell, Founder and Director of Outreach	H3 Project	Nonprofit providing houseless outreach services
“Ben”	Unhoused interviewee	Not his real name

Franklin Park

Created in 1832 to supply water to the White House and listed on the National Register of Historic Places (National Park Service, 2011), Franklin Park is a busy and centrally located park. Visited by over 589,300 visitors annually (DowntownDC Foundation, 2024), it is situated in an area near hotels, residential units, businesses, federal offices, and restaurants. It is also used by people experiencing houselessness, as well as members of the city's migrant and refugee populations.

Figure 14.1: Franklin Park Map on Entry Signage



Source: Helen Beck, 2024¹⁷¹

The park underwent a recent renovation and reopened in September 2021 following a \$21 million improvement that included restoring a central fountain, adding a children's garden,

¹⁷¹ This is a photo of a sign within Franklin Park.

installing tables and seating and constructing a restaurant and restroom facility (DowntownDC Foundation, n.d.).

Franklin Park is managed by Cecily Mendie and operated by seven full-time Park Ambassadors, under the supervision of a Park Supervisor. The Ambassadors are based in the park and responsible for keeping it clean, safe, and friendly and assisting visitors with their needs (DowntownDC Foundation, n.d., Career.com 2022). The park staff is supported by DowntownDC's Safety, Hospitality, and Maintenance Ambassador Team.

Operation and Management of the Park

In 2019, DowntownDC entered into a Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA) with the National Parks Service (NPS) and District of Columbia to operate Franklin Park. This was the first joint venture of its kind (Land Collective, n.d.). The public-private partnership was made possible after the U.S. Senate passed the Federal Lands Package. This altered federal law to provide the NPS with the authority to establish CMAs in order to co-operate with other organizations to manage or operate spaces (Congresswoman Norton, 2019).¹⁷² Since 2021, Franklin Park has been managed, maintained, and programmed by DowntownDC BID, a private, nonprofit organization.

Established in 1997, the BID covers 140 blocks, encompassing one square mile in downtown Washington, DC., which includes 24 acres of public parks and open spaces, including

¹⁷² The CMA enables the park to be funded by the BID with additional financial support from the BID's DowntownDC Foundation, which was created to facilitate the BID's philanthropic initiatives, as well as from local business and other commercial interests (DowntownDC, 2023a).

Franklin Park (DowntownDC, 2024). It is funded by a tax on business owners within this area, and Franklin Park is DowntownDC's largest green space (DowntownDC, n.d.).

Assisting individuals experiencing houselessness has been a core focus for DowntownDC since its inception and it continues to be a key priority – the organization allocated approximately \$1million, or six percent of its operating budget for 2025 to houseless services (DowntownDC, 2008, 2024). In 2019, DowntownDC opened the Downtown Day Services Center located one block south of Franklin Park. The center offers support to individuals experiencing houselessness, including free meals, showers, laundry services, assistance with accessing housing, on-site medical care, and employment support. The center assisted an average of 350 individuals each day in 2023 (DowntownDC, 2023b).

Caring Park Management

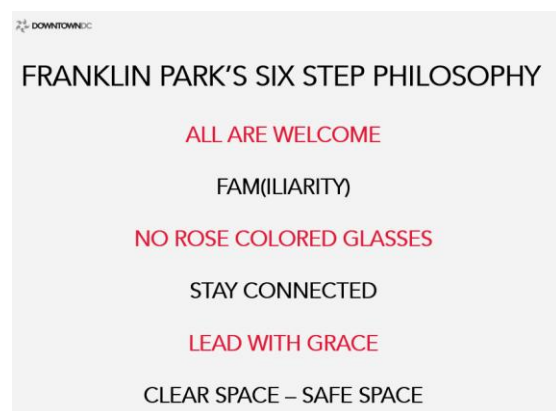
The DowntownDC parks masterplan highlights the importance of public parks as a venue for helping vulnerable populations connect with support services. The 2023 plan states: “Parks provide substandard living conditions and are ill-equipped to provide safe or healthy options for people struggling to find housing, but they can be used in the interim as forums to connect people with services” (DowntownDC, 2023a, p. 42).

The daily management of Franklin Park considers the needs of the park's unhoused visitors (Shoyinka et al., 2024; Beck, Mendie, & Shoyinka, 2025). Management practices prioritize creating a welcoming environment, building relationships with visitors, and ensuring safety throughout the park. Like the Freeway Park and Woodruff Park case studies in Chapters 12 and 13, the Park Ambassadors aim to greet everyone and establish familiarity with regular users. Cecily Mendie, DowntownDC's Franklin Park Manager, refers to this approach as the

“Franklin Park six-step philosophy,” which she has presented at various seminars and conferences (for example, PowerPoint slide, Figure 14.2).

This management philosophy is based on six tenets. Everyone is welcome in the park, regardless of their income or housing status. Staff should become familiar with the park’s visitors, recognizing that negative behaviors may sometimes occur (“no rose-colored glasses”). This familiarity helps staff understand and interpret such behaviors. The park’s management is supported by its connections with social service organizations that offer services and assistance to unhoused communities (“stay connected”). By “leading with grace,” park staff can maintain an open mind and affirm the dignity of all visitors using their amenities. Finally, “clear space – safe space” indicates that the park closes at night for safety reasons. Each evening, park staff engage with everyone still present, informing them that the park is closing. While the park is not gated, they explain that security officers patrol the area overnight and that individuals who re-enter after closing will be asked to leave.

Figure 14.2: Cecily Mendie’s Presentation, Park Pride Annual Conference (March 2024)



Source: Shoyinka et al., 2024

Cecily sees the core function of her job as Park Manager as the creator of a welcoming space: “you don’t get in trouble for welcoming people in - that’s what you’re supposed to do! And so, finding a strategy that helps you welcome everybody costs absolutely nothing, you can’t lose.” She added that in reference to their responses to issues related to houselessness: “we deal with these things every single day, and we do so in a way that does not have any political bearing on anybody.”

Rachel Hartman, DowntownDC’s Executive Director and Chief Strategy Officer, explained that the value of the approach in Franklin Park lies in spending time to connect with visitors to the park: “You’re not service providers, you’re not clinicians, you’re not social workers, but even without all of those titles, it’s still training people on how to be helpful and compassionate and get people the support they need.” Although the park’s annual operating budget is \$1.29 million, she emphasized the replicability of their approach, stating: “the compassionate part is completely free.”

Park Ambassador-Led Stewardship and Care

The seven Franklin Park Ambassadors are expected to greet visitors in a respectful manner and provide active and visible stewardship in the park. Their job description includes duties such as: “keep a watchful eye on the park and routinely monitor for suspicious/illegal activity” alongside the responsibility for providing “exceptional customer service in a courteous and professional manner to all park visitors and stakeholders” (Career.com 2022). Lukas, Director of Public Space Operations, emphasized the importance of recruiting staff with strong interpersonal skills, noting: “the most crucial is being able to talk to someone, a stranger, and being able to create a moment of connection that allows you to build a relationship.”

DowntownDC's organizational commitment to assisting individuals experiencing homelessness is reflected in the role and responsibilities of the Franklin Park Ambassadors. In contrast to the responsibilities of many publicly funded Park Ambassadors, a key role for the Franklin Park Ambassadors is directly assisting those who need help to connect with the barrier-free, support services available nearby at The DowntownDC's Day Services Center. Staff explain the services available to individuals, provide walking directions (the center is one block away) and encourage people to visit. They can also directly contact the center to request an outreach worker come to the park if people are reluctant or worried about walking over.

Rachel, Executive Director, described the Ambassador role as "unofficial" outreach: "speaking with people in the park is one of those unofficial outreach connections, because the more trust they have in staff, the more likely they are to continue going to the center or going for (services) for the first time." The Park Ambassadors are present from 4 am to 9 pm, providing a long window of opportunity to engage people. They have access to bottled water and supplies such as snacks and hand warmers. Furthermore, they staff the restrooms, which are open daily 6 am to 9 pm, keeping them safe and maintaining cleanliness. During my visits to the park, a diverse range of people were using the clean and heated restroom facilities (Figure 14.3).

Figure 14.3: Franklin Park Restroom Doors (decorated with the names of downtown parks)



Source: DowntownDC, 2023c

Cecily, Franklin Park Manager, highlighted the common-sense, pragmatic approach of the Park Ambassadors. She tries not to complicate or over-manage their engagements, instead telling the Ambassadors: “We just want all of you guys to try to be kind,” adding: “I always say, be a good person to people.” She is confident in the success of this straightforward approach: “they have very intimate relationships with these people that are in the park. And I don’t govern how they do that, to me it is important that they develop a rapport with people, but how they do that, or the things that they connect on - not my business.”

Diaz, Franklin Park Supervisor, explained how he interacts with unhoused individuals, ensuring he checks in with everyone using the park: “we make sure that they know we’re aware they’re there, they’re not just a body lay down in the park.” He greets everyone entering the park, checks in to see if they are okay, and informs them there are services available at the nearby day

center. He is cautious to respect people's boundaries, adding that sometimes people do not want to talk. He reassures them, when necessary: "I don't want to bother you; I just want to see you're okay." Diaz thinks it is common sense to focus on unhoused park users because: "they're the one who enjoy the park the most." When Diaz emphasized "enjoy," he was indicating that among all the visitors to the park, individuals experiencing houselessness are most regularly present and tend to spend the most time there. Therefore, it is important that the management of the park recognizes this.

Additionally, building a rapport with individuals experiencing houselessness benefits Diaz because it makes his job easier. For example, he believes that by getting to know people, they are more likely to behave respectfully in the park. He mentioned trash: "if you have a good relationship with them, they take their trash, so who is winning right there? It's us. And all we have to do is just treat people with respect." Chapter 10 and Chapter 12 (Freeway Park) also discussed unhoused users making efforts to clean trash from the spaces they use.

One Park Ambassador remarked: "You have to have a welcoming and warm park." She tries to remember the names of all regular park visitors, especially those she believes are unhoused. She feels supported by her colleagues to do her best to welcome unhoused visitors and provide assistance if needed:

If they need help, and I can help, I'm going to help, and thanks to my supervisor, I got a banging supervisor, he is so supportive. So yeah, without him I don't know, both of us take care of the unhoused (Park Ambassador, DowntownDC).

Another Ambassador shared an interaction with a park visitor whom she believed to be unhoused:

I had a guy over there one time, he was under the influence of something, and we talked, and we talked, and I asked him, “Do you need me to do anything? He said: “no.” He said: “I’m glad that you’re talking to me (Park Ambassador, DowntownDC).

He shared he had lost someone close to him:

He said that right now, I just need to stay focused on trying to get a job. And I encouraged him to try to put an application for DowntownDC. And when I saw him again, this was like months, or weeks later, he was on the outside of the park, and he actually came over to me and said, “I want to thank you very much for talking to me (Park Ambassador, DowntownDC).

She added that he told her: “I have a job now. He said: “I’m doing very well. And he said, thanks to you.”

Connecting Safety to Care

A key priority for DowntownDC is ensuring that Franklin Park is safe for all visitors. In addition to maintaining a welcoming environment, Park Ambassadors are responsible for enforcing the park’s code of conduct (Figure 14.4) and monitoring activities within the space. Ellouise Johnson, DowntownDC’s Senior Operations and Logistics Manager, explained that the Ambassadors: “clean, they’re also engaging, meaning they’re keeping an eye on this person, reporting back to let us know I see a new face.”

Figure 14.4: Franklin Park Code of Conduct



Source: Helen Beck, 2024

An Ambassador explained: “our job is to keep our eyes on the park.” If she sees a rule being broken, such as someone smoking, she reminds them of the code of conduct: “I try not to sound harsh. I just try to stay professional, keep it on that level, and let them know that we have to tell you these things, because that's part of the code of conduct.” They strive to find a balance between enforcing the park’s rules and providing a welcoming space to visitors, thereby engaging in a balancing act also described by the Freeway Park Association (Chapter 12) and the Seattle interviewees (Chapters 7 and 8).

The park's six-step philosophy (above) guides this approach. By developing familiarity with regular visitors, park staff enhance their understanding of why individuals may behave differently. This knowledge helps staff respond to various situations, helping them to distinguish between a bad day and a crisis that may require more intervention from outreach services or even law enforcement. Lukas, Director of Public Space Operations, described the park staff as DowntownDC's "eyes and ears" in monitoring the downtown area: "they're constantly observing and see what environments are out there, that allows us to have more information."

The Park Ambassadors are familiar with the routines of regular visitors and notice new people. One Ambassador remarked: "I could tell you times that there are certain guests that come when they come, I know when they come, there's a couple of guys that comes in the evening. Now, I know their time, they'll leave, they'll come back."

The park staff are cognizant of the vulnerability of their unhoused visitors. Diaz, Franklin Park Supervisor, believes people spend time in the park because it feels safe, and an important part of his role is maintaining that safety:

I believe that they feel safe, because no matter what, they know that Diaz, I'm there. because I could be at any corner of the park. But my eyes, I'm watching for people. I'm watching my staff; I'm watching the homeless people make sure everybody's fine (Rene Diaz-Morales, Franklin Park Supervisor, DowntownDC).

He added: "They know that nothing's gonna happen to them here. They know that we are here watching the park, taking care of the park, maintaining the park, and nobody's gonna come and mess with them."

A Park Ambassador connected this role in ensuring safety to helping people access support services. The Ambassador stated:

It's not just about keeping the park clean. It's about making sure people are safe here, if it's something that I can possibly do for them, not money or anything like that, but if I need to call and reach out to a shelter, give them information, I do that (Park Ambassador, DowntownDC).

Rachel, the Executive Director, placed the work in Franklin Park within the broader historical context of public parks, stating: “all of these public spaces were originally built not to necessarily include everybody. How do we take hard looks at backpedaling and fixing some things to make them more inclusive?” She highlighted the importance of ensuring that all individuals feel safe and welcome:

If it's designed in a way or messaged in a way that feels like you don't belong there, people aren't going to use it. So, I think parks going to be more utilized and successful, in my mind, if you're taking into account even individuals experiencing homelessness using your park (Rachel Hartman, Executive Director and Chief Strategy Officer, Downtown DC).

She added: “just seeing Franklin Park today, is what's good for people experiencing homelessness is good for everybody. It's just a lovely space, you know, right? Everyone needs the restroom, access to a nice, comfortable seat and water.” The evolution of traditional “clean and safe” outlooks to include a focus on support is also discussed in the next chapter.

Sleeping in the Park

Sleeping during the daytime is permitted in Franklin Park because DowntownDC recognizes that many unhoused individuals cannot safely sleep at night and therefore need a space in the day to rest. Ellouise, Senior Operations and Logistics Manager, mentioned: “we know there's just as many unhoused individuals roaming throughout the night as there is sleeping

throughout the night because a lot don't feel safe." Rachel, Executive Director, noted that allowing people to sleep in the park can be controversial:

That's still a tough conversation to have with people unfortunately, do we want the next bench to be an individual experiencing homelessness who's there for the day and like the idea that we would be setting that tone? It's still confusing to a lot of people (Rachel Hartman, Executive Director and Chief Strategy Officer, Downtown DC).

Diaz, Franklin Park Supervisor, also shared that he has received complaints from other park visitors about people sleeping, but it is not their policy to wake people up. He explained:

Okay, what about if, when people come from doing exercise and they're tired, they just lay down on the bench, can we say something to them? No. But it's just people. It's just people. Everybody's tired. Park is a park, you know, as long you know, you're not breaking the rules, absolutely not smoking, drinking, using profanity or bothering other people, the park is to enjoy (Rene Diaz-Morales, Franklin Park Supervisor, DowntownDC).

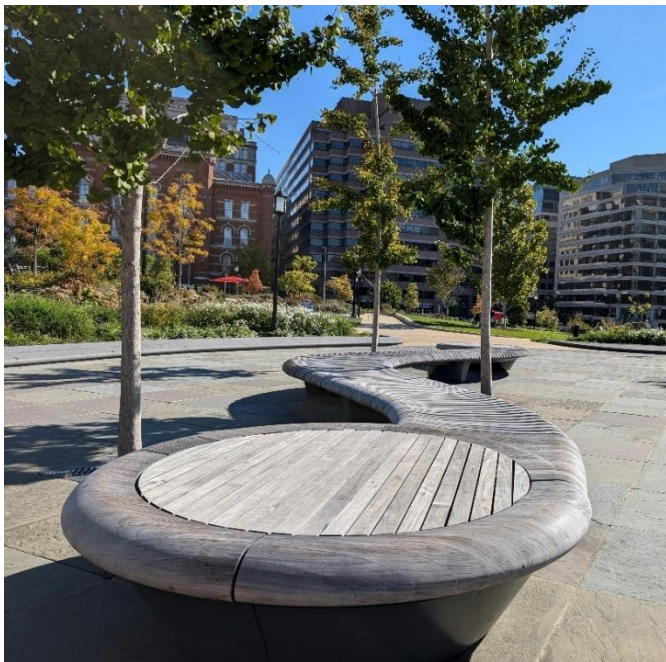
A Park Ambassador expressed a similar view, stating it doesn't make sense to her to tell an unhoused person they can't sleep when it's generally acceptable for other visitors to sunbathe or doze off in the sun, she remarked: "people should be able to rest and come here." These sentiments were also echoed by the unhoused interviewees in Chapter 10.

Franklin Park features five long, flat benches (Figure 14.5) that are suitable for lying down and sleeping. Cecily, Franklin Park Manager, shared her concerns when she first saw the benches in the park redesign, worrying about the implications if they were taken over by individuals sleeping on them, she admitted: "I hated the benches at first before the park opened because I was already foreseeing what would happen. But to be very honest with you, I love them now."

Unhoused visitors do use the benches to sleep, and some regularly spend the day on a specific bench. However, Cecily has found that the situation is manageable. Sleeping on the benches are just one way people are using the park's amenities and the park has not been overwhelmed by people using it as a place to sleep: "for whatever reason we've not had an influx of people that are coming and on every single bench and so I think that's part of the reason why it hasn't been a big deal." She added that, after all, this is what parks are designed for: "it just goes to show that when we say we want the park to be used – the park is being used!"

During the fieldwork visits to the park, a small number of (different) people were often using the benches to sleep, but never more than two. At the same time, nearby workers and other individuals were using tables and other benches to eat or meet friends. During one visit, a school group of children played in the park.

Figure 14.5: Large Bench in Franklin Park



Source: Helen Beck, October 2024

Accessible Park Programming

DowntownDC's program of events and activities in Franklin Park are free of charge to access and well-attended by different groups of people. Interviewees shared their views on the importance of these park events in providing enjoyment and entertainment to park visitors.¹⁷³ Lukas, the Director of Public Space Operations, highlighted that the park serves as a shared resource for everyone visiting the downtown area. He differentiated between their "paying stakeholders," which refers to business owners who contribute the tax that funds DowntownDC, and "non-paying stakeholders," which includes unhoused individuals in the downtown area. He stated he regularly sees people experiencing houselessness at park events, and he believes these gatherings provide a vital source of respite: "I think it brings some form of, and I use quotes "normal" into their lives and that's one of the things I've been most pleased about some of the events that we've done." He connected DowntownDC's programming to a broader goal of achieving environmental equity: "that's what allows us to create an environment that is equitable."

Rachel, the Executive Director, commented that the park's events can bring joy to individuals experiencing houselessness, stating: "it's like some people found some joy today, and that's pretty exciting to see." She observed that other organizations might feel apprehensive about hosting events in areas used by unhoused populations, noting "an approach of oh gosh, is this the types of people we want to be dominating the dancing at the event?" She thinks Franklin Park programming is unusual in the level of welcome they provide: "I don't know that I've seen a lot

¹⁷³ DowntownDC does not collect data stratified by housing status, so it is not possible to exactly determine how well-used these events are by the houseless community.

of that, that particular kind of welcoming, like you are a fabric of our audience, and please be here and enjoy this!”

Cecily, the Franklin Park Manager, discussed the approach to programming in Franklin Park: “I don’t believe in programming for a group, I believe in programming just generally.” In common with the Freeway Park Association (Chapter 12), Franklin Park’s programs include provision to enable more vulnerable visitors to participate equitably. She explained: “you just create programs for everyone and understand that the unhoused might be here. Or you think about ways to support the unhoused that may come.” For instance, she mentioned the value of providing a place to store people’s belongings because this helps in: “taking away the impediments that exist that keep people from being able to participate in programs.” During events, they emphasize practicality - she acknowledged there are limitations to the extent they can help: “somebody asked me, ‘well what if somebody has four shopping carts’ Yeah, we can’t accommodate four shopping carts, there are limitations right.”

Cecily recounted a recent event with live music where a woman attended with four or five bags. Park staff kept an eye on her belongings while she danced, Cecily advised: “Just do the things that you’re doing and create ways to accommodate people that want to be a part of the thing that you’re doing.”

Adapting to Increasing Houselessness

The DowntownDC interviewees discussed how the roles and responsibilities of public space management professionals are evolving and changing due to the growing issue of houselessness across the nation. Lukas, Director of Public Space Operations, commented:

This is the world we live in right now, so like when public DPRs (Department of Parks and Recreation) around the world, or around the country were established, probably homelessness is not part of their agenda right? So, I think what places can do better is really just knowing, hey this is an element now, and now we have to build our ecosystem around it (Lukas Umana, Director of Public Space Operations, DowntownDC).

Cecily emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining connections with organizations that provide social support services to individuals experiencing homelessness. She has worked to gain a better understanding of the services offered by local agencies and to communicate this knowledge effectively to the staff in the park. Although this way of working is new to her, she views the development of broader partnerships as essential for providing a high-quality service to park visitors. She stated: “you don’t have to be subject matter expert,” but: “you have to know where to go for resources.” She has dedicated time to developing a list of key agencies to understand the available services to help park visitors experiencing homelessness: “you need to be able to know who somebody is, and is responsive, that can get out there immediately.” She added:

Being aware of what we're dealing with and just very simple ways of approaching it, I think that's something that we all need to be able to do as part as park professionals. I think that if we don't - we lose (Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC).

Cecily believes adaptation in the field of public parks is inevitable and that change is part of their core role: “As a parks professional, I have seen this role change a lot throughout the years, I believe as we talk about evolution, I think that evolution is inevitable. People have to change and adapt and adjust.” She thinks it is important that the public park agencies quickly recognize their shifting responsibilities, stating:

How you stay relevant is by understanding the world and your role in it. And the world right now is one where we’re dealing with an issue, an uptick of housed guests. Then

your role should be to understand what a solution is, or how we deal with that demographic (Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC).

During her presentation at the 2025 National Recreation and Park Association annual conference, Cecily highlighted the increasing issue of houselessness among children, noting that they are a key group served by public park and recreation agencies (Beck, Mendie, & Shoyinka, 2025).¹⁷⁴ She cautioned against quick, reactive judgments regarding houselessness and emphasized that responding to the needs of unhoused individuals should not be seen as outside the purview of the field. Acknowledging that not everyone may welcome this perspective, she had also stated during her interview:

If you don't want to – I get it. Because a lot of people don't want to, but you have to understand that your role is not going to be as simple as opening up a recreation center or opening the doors of a park (Cecily Mendie, Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC).

She added, while it may push some park professionals out of their comfort zones (also discussed in Chapter 9) but park and recreation specialists are in a unique position to foster positive change because they possess many of the essential skills needed to manage public spaces inclusively: “I think that Parks and Recreation professionals are uniquely equipped to be able to come up with not the solutions, but something close to a solution, for at least how to deal with unhoused guests.”

¹⁷⁴ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that nearly 150,000 children (under the age of 18) experienced houselessness on a single night in 2024. Additionally, between 2023 and 2024, children were the age group that experienced the largest increase in houselessness (HUD, 2024b).

Humanizing the Unhoused

DowntownDC actively engages in discussions about houselessness with their business stakeholders to humanize the experiences of those who are unhoused. By helping their stakeholders understand the reasons why people experience houselessness, they aim to encourage empathy for the challenges these individuals experience in their daily lives.

Lukas, Director of Public Space Operations, explained: “We’re here in DowntownDC to bridge the gap, to show that they can share, all can share this green space.” He emphasized that the key is “really trying to humanize the unhoused community.” For example, he always tries to refer to unhoused individuals by their name because:

It's harder to treat someone poorly that you know their name, because once you know someone's name, it actually makes them a person, right? So, I think that's why I like to use names when I'm dealing with stakeholders because I think it really does create an aspect to them of, ‘hey, you know what? This is a person here that we're talking about.’ Yes, this could impact your financial ability. But the reality is, this is a person, and this is extremely important (Lukas Umanaa, Director of Public Space Operations, DowntownDC).

He perceives the BID is working as a connector between the different groups working in the downtown area: “to create a commonality between our stakeholders that are paying stakeholders and our stakeholders that happen to have found their way into the BID.” He acknowledges that it is sometimes a struggle to find common ground between the groups, but it is important because it is part of their role in making people using the downtown area feel safe and welcome.

Building commonality takes time. Ellouise, Senior Operations and Logistics Manager, remarked: “it starts with maybe a phone call, having a zoom call, then add someone else, and

then the circle grows bigger and then getting the buy in and that keeps the ball rolling so. And then there's grants out there that they can get to help." Ellouise and Lukas strive to be proactive and solution-led during their discussions with stakeholders. Rachel noted: "we love pilot projects" because it enables them to test out different ideas and move forward quickly.

Challenges to the Provision of Care

The interviewees recognize the limits of their ability to assist people experiencing homelessness. Rachel, the Executive Director, stated that she believes they are working hard within the confines of their role as managers of Franklin Park: "we can control what happens in this space that we manage. I think that's the most gratifying part, is we can actually do something." She is particularly proud that they meet people's needs: "you see people who don't have enough clothes on and it's like walk one block down, you can get clothing. We would feel pretty empty if we had nothing to say."

However, they face challenges due to the level of social support services available in the city, with a shortage of housing being a significant barrier. Rachel observed "I can't control the city's policies. Cecily can't make more beds open for people." They have discussed trying to do more by leveraging the BID's resources to establish temporary housing, but they are conscious this would be outside of their scope and traditional expertise as a downtown association. Rachel explained:

We could buy a building and create temporary housing. Like, we could do that, but should we do that? Is it effective? Are we the best people to do that? What if it can't we can't sustain it? What if our board doesn't want to do it? (Rachel Hartman, Executive Director and Chief Strategy Officer, Downtown DC).

Chapter 15 discusses questions regarding the compatibility of care-oriented responses with the mission of private place-management organizations. Additionally, the approach in Franklin Park cannot be quickly replicated. The stewardship and activities in Franklin Park rely on park-based staff who have spent time developing rapport with their regular unhoused visitors, and are supported by well-maintained amenities that include seating, tables, and restrooms. The depth and breadth of work required to implement successful practices of caring park management can be difficult for areas to achieve if they are under pressure from residents or other stakeholders to implement a swift fix for challenging behaviors. In summer 2025, following concerns about anti-social behavior, Cecily was asked to establish activation activities in Triangle Park, a small unstaffed public space next door to the Downtown Day Services Center. Located a block away from Franklin Park, Triangle Park falls within the area covered by DowntownDC. Activating this space is challenging due to its size, peripheral location, and lack of infrastructure, including seating. It will take time, resources, and effort to develop and build rapport with the individuals using the space and understand their needs. Successful results are not guaranteed.

Finally, the fieldwork in Franklin Park found that the DowntownDC staff are deeply passionate about their work and motivated by the desire to explore new ways of operating that positively impact on the lives of unhoused visitors to the park. During my visit, the interviewees shared numerous anecdotal examples that illustrated the benefits of their work. However, they did not provide quantitative data to demonstrate their impact. This contrasts with the data collected for the Downtown Day Services Center (Figure 14.6). A lack of data hinders other areas from learning from forward-thinking examples like Franklin Park and restricts effective

communication about the value of care-based approaches in public spaces. Chapter 15 further discusses the scarcity of quantitative data on place-based care activities.

Figure 14.6: Downtown Day Services Center Impact Figures (2023 – 2024)



Source: DowntownDC, 2024

Summary

The caring management philosophy for Franklin Park actively considers the needs of the unhoused individuals who visit the space. The stewardship of the park is grounded in an understanding of why people experiencing houselessness are drawn to spend time in it. Park Ambassadors work to create a friendly and welcoming environment for all groups by greeting visitors and building rapport with frequent users of the space. The Ambassadors ensure that amenities are clean, safe, and well-maintained. They recognize that these “clean and safe” efforts are essential for individuals experiencing houselessness, as it provides them with a supportive and inclusive park to access.

The Ambassadors also act as “unofficial outreach,” engaging with visitors to check if they need assistance. They connect individuals to the nearby Downtown Day Services Center or contact outreach workers to visit the space. Cecily, the Franklin Park Manager has gone beyond the traditional scope of her role to build broader connections with local social service providers and understand the services available for unhoused individuals who frequent the park.

The interviewees from DowntownDC acknowledge the challenges of managing a busy downtown park that serves diverse groups. Park staff take a pragmatic approach, enforcing the park’s code of conduct while maintaining a realistic “no rose-tinted glasses” outlook. The emphasis is on ensuring that Franklin Park remains a safe place for individuals experiencing houselessness to spend their day and, if necessary, catch up on sleep.

Franklin Park’s care-based park management approach is reinforced by the presence of on-site staff from 4am to 9pm along with recently refurbished, high-quality amenities. Core to their efforts is building relationships with the unhoused users of the park and intentionally including this population in their services and programming. The efforts in Franklin Park are significantly bolstered by DowntownDC’s commitment to assisting unhoused individuals. Far-sighted leaders recognize the importance of care-oriented public space management and continue to uphold this commitment.

Franklin Park's staffing and resource levels may be unrealistic for the average city park; however, key aspects of this approach could be adopted by public park and recreation agencies operating on tighter budgets. These agencies could leverage existing connections and develop new partnerships to better address the needs of unhoused individuals using their spaces and amenities. Central to Franklin Park’s strategy are practices that are familiar to public park and

recreation professionals: greeting and getting to know visitors, providing active stewardship through programming and activities and maintaining spaces to keep them accessible for all users. Cecily believes that public park professionals are uniquely equipped to positively fulfill this role.

The case study demonstrates the positive influence park-based staff can have in downtown spaces and the value of leadership commitment in driving responses to issues relating to houselessness. Chapter 15 further explores lessons learned from the case studies to enhance understanding of the practicalities involved in providing care to vulnerable individuals in public parks.

Chapter 15: Delivering Park-Based Care - Learning from the Three Case Studies

Introduction

The case studies presented in Chapters 12 to 14 show how different parks take different operational and management approaches in responding to issues relating to houselessness. While each case focuses on specific methods of delivering care such as caring park management (Franklin Park, Washington, D.C.), caring programming (Freeway Park, Seattle), or park-based supportive outreach (Woodruff Park, Atlanta), they share important commonalities. This chapter examines these common features to better understand place-based, and park-based care, defined in this study as care practices that are situated within and actively enacted through the public spaces frequented by individuals experiencing houselessness. Place-based care focuses on caring practices tied to physical locations broadly; park-based care narrows this to the particular context of public parks.

The case studies share seven characteristics in how their approaches to care developed and the way they work today. All three cases have transitioned from a public safety-dominated perspective towards the provision of support (1), and each has moved to an organization-wide commitment to care (2). They have all made efforts to create welcoming and inclusive parks by including individuals experiencing houselessness in the community they serve and actively working to understand their needs (3). They provide active stewardship in their spaces (4) and have established new connections with social support agencies to deliver park-based care (5). Each case study organization delivers care responses within the park (6). Lastly, each

organization is pursuing innovative methods of working despite the absence of published evidence-based solutions or best practices (7).

This chapter also identifies important challenges and limitations that highlight the complexities of delivering care in park settings, as seen in the case studies. There is little guidance on implementing place-based care responses in public spaces. As this approach is new, the specific skills required to carry out place-based care effectively are not well-defined. Another challenge is that these skills are not widely recognized as relevant for public park and recreation professionals in the first place. The potential role for the field in delivering care is not well established.

The case study sites are evolving and experimenting; they do not collect much data through performance measures to evaluate their outcomes. Additionally, the case study approaches may not align with the preferences of individuals experiencing houselessness. Two of three case studies are Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), privately operated organizations focused on the vitality of their city's downtown area, which raises questions about the compatibility of place-based care with their broader mission.

Finally, the success of place-based care is constrained by factors beyond the control of those working in public spaces. For instance, the wider landscape of care for unhoused people in a given city is crucial. The shortage of affordable housing and limited availability of social services significantly affect the support that can be provided to individuals experiencing houselessness.

Commonalities in Approach

Other U.S. public park and recreation agencies (see Chapter 3) have reported adopting new approaches to respond to issues related to houselessness (NRPA, 2017). For example, a survey by the National Recreation and Park Association reported that one quarter of the 65 park and recreation agencies that responded said that they are providing programming specific to their houseless population, with the most common response being providing drop-in hours for social service support (NRPA, 2017, p. 8). However, the lack of national evidence or published best practices regarding these activities makes it difficult to understand what approaches are being adopted or how they compare to the approaches in the three case study sites. Neither is it possible to assess overall progress towards providing place-based care responses for individuals experiencing houselessness or other marginalized populations by park and recreation agencies.

This section aims to show how agencies can develop care-based practices by drawing on the lessons from the three case studies. The seven characteristics below provide valuable insights into the successful implementation and delivery of place-based care in response to houselessness by highlighting the essential elements that all three case study sites have adopted.

1. Evolution of the “clean and safe” outlook

Like many public parks and recreation agencies (see Chapter 2), the three case study organizations had oriented their public space management practices toward ensuring their parks and public areas are “clean and safe.” This approach involved enforcement-focused, public safety-led responses for issues related to houselessness.

This perspective was informed by the belief that increasing houselessness is synonymous with a rise in crime and thus needs to be controlled, thereby making unhoused individuals the focus of policing activities. For example, in Seattle and Atlanta, both the Freeway Park Association (FPA) and the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) invested effort and resources in responses that moved unhoused people out of their public spaces. They worked with local police and security organizations to monitor areas and enforce rules and regulations that discourage people experiencing houselessness from spending extended periods in public spaces.

Yet, the case studies in this dissertation (see Chapters 12-14) reveal that the public space organizations also recognize that these enforcement-oriented strategies were ineffective. The case study organizations understood they could no longer “police their way out” of houselessness, and that this should be addressed as a public health issue, not a law enforcement matter. They sought to adapt ideas of what constitutes “clean and safe” by shifting away from the displacement of marginalized populations towards the provision of support. They examined how providing clean and safe parks can positively impact the quality of life for the individuals experiencing houselessness that are reliant on these spaces for their daily survival needs.

In common with Seattle Park and Recreation (SPR) interviewees, the case study interviewees reported feeling a sense of futility and anxiety as houselessness continued to rise. They understood that the individuals being removed from their parks often returned due to a lack of alternatives and recognized the impossibility of erasing people experiencing houselessness from urban spaces. They also acknowledged the human cost associated with punitive measures that criminalize people and exacerbate the challenges related to houselessness.

In response, the organizations in each case study sought to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the needs of those frequently present in their spaces. They shifted away from the stigmatization of people experiencing houselessness, who are often seen as detracting from the quality of public spaces (Mitchell, 2003; Roy, 2003; Beckett & Herbert, 2010). Instead, the three organizations shifted their perspective, taking the time to think through alternative approaches, acknowledging that being houseless in a public space is not a crime and that utilizing their parks to offer access to support services is both valuable and within their scope of responsibility.

For example, DowntownDC and ADID have actively worked to shift the preferences of their business stakeholders away from short-term, knee-jerk reactions towards responses that support individuals in overcoming houselessness in the long-term. They communicate to local businesses that they understand that visible houselessness can be difficult to see and they will continue to address negative or disruptive behaviors through enforcement, but they are not there to police the optics of houselessness. As a result of this work, all three organizations have shifted towards providing social support as a core part of their public realm management.

2. Movement to an organizational commitment to care

Some Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) interviewees (Chapter 9) expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about whether it falls within their organization's remit or "wheelhouse" to provide support to individuals experiencing houselessness. In contrast, the case study organizations (FPA, ADID, and DowntownDC) assert that it is their responsibility to consider the needs of houseless individuals visiting their spaces because they are part of the community they serve. They believe that incorporating supportive services is both within the scope of public

space management and part of their duty as stewards of the public realm. Interviewees in all three case study sites expressed that caring for vulnerable populations is an important part of their identity as compassionate individuals and a significant motivation for performing well in their parks.

Implementing change within the case study organizations necessitated actively engaging stakeholders, board members, and local communities in often challenging discussions about the role of parks in the context of growing houselessness and who they identify as part of the community. Individuals in each organization questioned established practices of public space management - such as prohibiting people from sleeping in parks or keeping park staff separate from unhoused individuals - that no longer align with the realities of urban areas that have houseless populations. Instead, they sought to explore new approaches grounded in a more compassionate perspective.

Key to enacting change in the organizations and moving to more supportive responses was developing a deeper, nuanced understanding of houselessness and effectively communicating to stakeholders the various reasons individuals may become unhoused to encourage empathy and compassion for this group. They emphasized the critical positive role that public spaces can play for those experiencing houselessness and highlighted the potential of these spaces to provide additional support and assistance. For example, to encourage their board members to think further about why individuals are experiencing houselessness, the FPA, Seattle, invited an individual who was formerly unhoused to speak about their experiences during a meeting.

ADID and DowntownDC reported that it was relatively easy to persuade their business stakeholders to move towards focusing on support for individuals experiencing houselessness.

The change in organizational ethos is likely due to a sense of fatigue within that community stemming from a belief that enforcement-led activities were ineffective and because houselessness continued to visibly increase in their areas. The FPA successfully convinced their board to shift their focus to supporting people experiencing houselessness by humanizing those who are unhoused and highlighting the benefits of moving away from reliance on police intervention in parks.

Central to achieving these cultural shifts was the belief held by senior leaders that implementing more supportive practices and services for the unhoused users of their spaces and amenities is the right thing to do, that it is their responsibility to address these pressing social issues within the context of public space management. For example, DowntownDC's commitment to supporting individuals experiencing houselessness originates from its founding leadership. This commitment has cultivated an organizational culture of compassion that continues to exert a significant influence today. In Atlanta, ADID's supportive outreach efforts were initially funded by a grant. After this funding ended, the organization decided to divert funding from their core operations enabling outreach to houseless populations to continue on a long-term and stable basis.

3. Creation of welcoming and inclusive spaces

Each of the organizations that support the case study sites aims to ensure that their parks provide welcoming and inclusive environments for all. By utilizing these positive settings as a tool to connect with individuals who regularly spend time in their spaces, park-based staff have built rapport and trust, successfully engaging with local unhoused populations to provide support or help connect them to services. At the heart of this is recognizing that individuals experiencing

houselessness are part of the community they serve. The creation of welcoming and inclusive spaces takes effort and time. Each organization is committed to this approach, understanding that positive results do not happen overnight.

A fundamental aspect of the positive engagement with individuals experiencing houselessness in each study site has been the development of knowledge and understanding among park-based staff regarding the reasons behind houselessness, the realities of living houseless, and the relevant agencies that offer services and assistance. This increased knowledge has helped to change practice, challenge negative perceptions of individuals experiencing houselessness, and humanize those who are regularly present in park spaces.

For example, interviewees from DowntownDC noted that once they learned many individuals experiencing houselessness lack a safe place to sleep at night, they began allowing people to rest in Franklin Park during the day. Park staff now also sometimes educate the public about why people may be sleeping, a private behavior that some find disturbing or unsettling to see. Such welcoming acts of stewardship contribute to making the park a common space for all populations.

The Cozy Corner program in Freeway Park is designed to provide an inclusive and welcoming for all attendees regardless of their housing status. However, for those attending the program that arrive hungry, cold, or in need of assistance, there is additional support such as lunches, blankets, access to fire pits, and information on supportive services. The program brings diverse groups of people together to enjoy the park on an equitable basis. Gabi, the Park Operations Coordinator at Freeway Park, has taken the time to get to know the individuals that

frequently visit the park. This has involved patience and a willingness to repeatedly connect with people to eventually build rapport.

In both Woodruff Park (Atlanta) and Franklin Park (Washington, D.C.) there are staff onsite, or close to the park, throughout most of the day. In Woodruff Park, the Supportive Service Case Managers spend around 75% of their working day outside, while the Park Ambassadors in Franklin Park are based within the space. This affords an easier level of connection with individuals experiencing houselessness using the parks, allowing rapport to develop more naturally and over-time.

Chapter 16 further explores the potential for place-based care to reshape public parks as spaces for support and discusses their value in providing a civic commons (Gilmore, 2017). It also considers the replicability of these approaches for publicly funded park and recreation agencies that might be more constrained in their levels of resourcing and staffing.

4. Providing active public space stewardship

The parks in the case studies are not exclusively used by individuals experiencing houselessness; they are busy, vibrant downtown spaces frequented by many different people. Staff members are regularly and visibly present in each case study park. At each site, they greet visitors and actively maintain cleanliness, safety, and the overall condition of the park. By engaging with visitors, these staff provide stewardship and build familiarity with individuals who frequently visit the spaces.

Implementing programs aimed at supporting the unhoused has not led to an overwhelming influx of unhoused people or adversely affected the parks. This reality contrasts with concerns

expressed by some SPR interviewees about “enabling” houselessness by providing additional services or amenities in their spaces. For example, they were hesitant to incorporate elements such as food, fearing it might lead to people experiencing houselessness lingering too long in their community centers (see Chapter 8).

This stewardship is important in ensuring no single group dominates the space. For instance, Gabi, the Park Operations Coordinator at Freeway Park, emphasized her responsibility for curating an environment that is welcoming for everyone, but not every behavior. She monitors the park to prevent negative behaviors from affecting the experiences of other park users, making sure nobody impinges on the welcome of others in the park. By building her familiarity with the park’s frequent visitors, she is more likely to understand the difference between behavior that might be unpalatable to other park users but ultimately harmless, such as shouting, versus more concerning behavior that requires intervention.

Interviewees highlighted that park staff serve as the “eyes and ears” of their spaces. This role sometimes includes bringing in additional support from local security agencies or police, though the case studies recognize the risks associated with calling law enforcement for issues involving unhoused individuals. Some interviewees stated that calling the police should be a last resort (also discussed in point 1 above). Park staff view their unhoused visitors as vulnerable individuals and seek to protect them from unnecessary risks or negative consequences from using their spaces.

5. Developing new partnerships

The supportive work at each of the three case study sites is informed and assisted by partnerships with organizations that have expertise, resources, or services for supporting the

unhoused. Establishing these connections required the case study organizations to work outside their typical scope of operations and to build new relationships. Maintaining these partnerships takes effort and time and is made more challenging due to the high turnover of staff in the houseless services sector due to low wages, stress, and burnout (Pagaduan, 2022).

A significant challenge reported by SPR interviewees was the uncertainty around who to contact when someone needs assistance (Chapter 8). For example, Cecily, the Franklin Park (Washington, D.C.) Manager, explained that by making links with local social support agencies, she has gained a better understanding of where to find help. She believes that these connections have increased the likelihood of timely responses from outreach services and enabled her to build a better picture of the key agencies locally with whom to maintain a relationship. She tries to build relationships with a range of individuals in case people leave their roles.

There are a multitude of social service providers that are either located near to the case study sites, or include that area in their outreach activities, and interviewees reported that the volume and spread of agencies can be confusing – a common issue also raised by SPR participants. To support their efforts and promote collaboration, each case study organization now hosts regular meetings that bring together key social support agencies and other local partners. These meetings facilitate information sharing, provide a platform for organizations to promote their work or available resources, and help create stability of connection in the event that individual staff members leave.

Maintaining connections with social support agencies is challenging in each case study city. The FPA faces additional difficulties because their park is situated between two resource areas in

Seattle. At the time of fieldwork, there was no outreach support organization assigned to cover this space, making it difficult to find park-based assistance.

6. Delivering care responses within the park

Each case study organization uses their park as a place to address the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness and connect them to services. These three cases illustrate the diverse ways public parks can serve as a venue for support and a place of care. In Freeway Park, Seattle, the focus is on providing open-to-all, equity-based park programming, with additional resources available for those who are hungry, cold, or in need of assistance. In Franklin Park, D.C., Park Ambassadors strive to create a comfortable and safe environment for everyone to spend their time, offering access to restrooms and other amenities located in the nearby day services center, such as showers or food.

Meanwhile, in Woodruff Park, Atlanta, the park, as well as the area's surrounding public spaces, is the primary venue for the activities of the Supportive Services Outreach Team. Their park-based outreach workers engage with marginalized individuals in the places they frequent to provide immediate, on-the-spot, assistance. By connecting with people in the park, outreach workers interact with people in the spaces where they choose to spend their time and feel most at ease. This approach eliminates the need for individuals to travel to an office for a specific time, which can be extremely challenging for those with few resources or no secure place to leave their belongings. It is even more difficult for those experiencing chronic houselessness who may also be struggling with health conditions, mental illness, and/or issues related to addiction.

Utilizing the park as a setting for service delivery also helps the outreach workers in Woodruff Park stay connected with their clients. Staff start their days in the park and become

familiar with where to find individuals, allowing them to better address their needs as they work over the long term to help access housing, employment, or other essential services, such as ID replacement. Furthermore, park users can see the outreach workers as they work and could approach them for assistance if needed.

While each case study organization uses their park to deliver situated care to unhoused populations, they also strive to ensure a high-quality experience for all visitors. The three parks host a variety of free activities and events that are open to everyone and are well-attended. Balancing the competing needs of public space users is complex and can be imperfect, as discussed further in Chapter 8, and below.

7. Commitment to try in the absence of evidenced solutions

There is limited guidance on best practices for using public spaces to support individuals experiencing houselessness. The interviewees from each study site felt their work was unique. For example, the FPA did not know any other park-based organizations providing similar programming, and ADID and DowntownDC, as BIDs, believe they are unusual in directly funding and providing park and place-based support for houseless individuals. The literature review for this dissertation found few other park-based examples (as discussed in Chapter 3) where public space management organizations have taken direct responsibility for providing care to unhoused populations.

Despite the lack of published evidence, the case study interviewees expressed a strong commitment to exploring new ways to welcome and assist their unhoused visitors, often proactively making links within the sector to discuss issues. For example, this research facilitated a connection between Cecily Mendie, the Franklin Park Manager in D.C. and Nakasha Shoyinka,

the Director of Supportive Services in Atlanta. They have learned from each other's work and continue to communicate to discuss the further potential of utilizing their park spaces to aid individuals experiencing houselessness.¹⁷⁵

The interviewees emphasized that they are learning as they go and that their strategies are continually evolving. Supporting individuals experiencing houselessness has required them to step outside their comfort zones, acquire new knowledge, and adapt to working in new and unfamiliar ways. They approach challenges pragmatically, guided by common sense and personal judgment, recognizing that it can take multiple attempts to help individuals. Progress can be painstakingly slow, and successful outcomes are not guaranteed. Nonetheless, the organizations are committed to their work long-term and believe in its value.

Challenges and Limitations of Park-Based Care

The practice of care can be messy and burdensome (Tronto, 2010). Offering park-based care and support to individuals experiencing chronic houselessness is particularly complex due to the multitude of issues this population is struggling with and takes time (HUD, 2015). The three case studies demonstrate what each site has been able to implement within the broader constraints of key structural problems stemming from the failures of capitalism, bound by each organization's appetite for change and the resources available.

This section draws from the case study interviews and fieldwork observations to further explore the complexities of delivering care, referring specifically to the experiences in these

¹⁷⁵ Cecily, Nakasha, and I jointly presented at the Park Pride annual conference (2024) and the National Recreation and Park Association annual conference (2025).

three sites. It identifies five challenges or limitations to delivering park-based care, which are further explored below:

1. This dissertation primarily relies on the qualitative data provided by the study's interviewees. This information provides a comprehensive picture but would be strengthened with quantitative evidence measured by specific performance indicators.
2. The skills necessary to deliver effective care are not codified or standardized, raising questions about the ideal expertise and experience required for high-quality place-based care. This dissertation provides insights into what those types of skills might be.
3. While the case study approaches are underpinned by active park stewardship, the presence of surveillance can be uncomfortable for some unhoused individuals, limiting the effectiveness of park-based care.
4. The Atlanta and D.C. case studies are operated by private organizations, and this raises questions about how compatible the mission of these organizations is with providing care, and it has potential implications for the accessibility of spaces for vulnerable populations.
5. Finally, ultimately, the level of support provided to unhoused populations is constrained by factors beyond the control of the case organizations, primarily the overall availability of affordable housing and social services in each city. Park-based care is not a complete

solution; it is just one tool among a broader set of programs aimed at engaging with, and assisting, those experiencing houselessness.

Additionally, Chapter 16 examines other practicalities in delivering place-based care, beyond the examples illustrated here.

1. Absence of guidance or performance measures

There is no rulebook for providing place-based care, and there is little guidance on care-based responses in public spaces. For example, in Seattle, there are city-led initiatives addressing houselessness (Chapter 6) and significant commitments to environmental and social justice (Chapter 11). However, there is currently no comprehensive policy or guidance document that integrates these efforts to provide tailored support for individuals experiencing houselessness in public parks and recreation facilities.

The case study sites examined are working pragmatically to test alternative ways of working and explore different ways of meeting needs in their spaces. Park-based staff in each site expressed a strong belief in the value of their work. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Methods), the information gathered during interviews was cross-referenced with field observations and a literature search of relevant articles and other published information. This approach developed a rich, comprehensive picture of the approaches in each site.

It was not, however, possible to fully assess outcomes. The case study organizations measure some metrics, such as the number of individuals engaged, and the types of services provided. They also provide qualitative examples of the benefits of their approaches. However, they do not use a comprehensive set of performance measures to evaluate their outcomes. Neither site has

commissioned an independent evaluation of its approach. Aside from a case study by the Project for Public Spaces on early work in Woodruff Park (Madison, 2020), there are no existing case studies on the place-based work in either site. The case studies would be improved by the inclusion of more quantitative data.

Success in each case study site is not guaranteed. The agencies involved are broadening their operational scope and taking on atypical responsibilities for their sector. Each works with stakeholder organizations to build support and allocate resources to underpin their approaches. All three organizations seemed comfortable with the experimental nature of their work. This could pose a cultural and practical challenge for more risk-averse, publicly funded organizations that typically face greater bureaucracy and reporting requirements, as well as slower processes of engagement and decision-making. Chapter 16 explores promising areas for further research that could help in building a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of place-based care and enable organizations to evidence the value of their work.

2. The skills to deliver place-based care are not defined

The skill set for delivering park-based care is not well defined. Park-based care is not a common approach, and as discussed above, the case study organizations are developing and refining their approaches as they go forward. The staff involved in providing care in each case study organization come from a variety of backgrounds, each possessing varying levels of expertise and experience. The outreach workers in Atlanta have the most direct expertise relating to services for houseless populations, coming from backgrounds in criminal justice and clinical psychology, and having experience working in shelters or mental health services.

It is unclear what exact skills are necessary for providing high-quality park-based care to unhoused populations, but this research suggests that a positive and open attitude toward acknowledging and caring for all parks users is a good start. Still, identifying a clear skillset and providing support to develop such skills is important and should not depend on goodwill or altruism alone. Questions include what constitutes the best “package” of expertise and experience, whether a caring aptitude is innate or can be learned on the job, and how to best support staff in further developing their skills and knowledge. The case study organizations have trained their staff in conflict management and de-escalation, mental health support, and basic first aid. However, at the time of the research, no one employed a social worker, even though individuals in this role possess the right skills and expertise necessary for providing effective park-based care.¹⁷⁶

This study did not determine whether it is preferable to hire individuals with social work expertise or if it is sufficient to have staff with community-building skills and experience. Employing staff with a Bachelor’s or Master’s in Social Work may have important implications for budgets and the ability to recruit. On the other hand, using well-meaning staff without specific training in social support for vulnerable populations risks providing care that may be superficial or ineffective. Chapter 16 sets out areas for further research on these issues.

Across the three case sites studied, emphasis is placed on hiring park-based staff who can effectively build relationships with diverse groups of people, indicating that a welcoming aptitude is key to delivering place-based care. For example, the job description for the Franklin

¹⁷⁶ The initial pilot approach (from 2018 to 2020) in Woodruff Park did employ a trained social worker. However, at the time of research, none of the outreach workers held a qualification in Social Work.

Park Ambassadors requires applicants to possess: “good interpersonal skills, demonstrate a consistent willingness and ability to appropriately engage with a diverse range of DowntownDC stakeholders, and maintain a friendly, professional demeanor at all times” (Career.com, 2023). One of the successful applicants, now a valued staff member, had over a decade of experience in customer service at McDonald’s at the time of applying.

3. Public space stewardship can feel like surveillance

A key finding of the three case studies is the active stewardship of the spaces they manage. Staff are visibly present, monitoring spaces and engaging with visitors daily in Franklin Park and during scheduled programming or outreach in Woodruff Park and Freeway Park. However, interviews with individuals experiencing chronic houselessness in Seattle (Chapter 10) revealed that some prefer to be left alone and do not want attention drawn to their presence, fearing potential arrest for being houseless. For example, four unhoused interviewees expressed a preference for quiet, empty park spaces. One interviewee, George, mentioned that he felt calmer when he did not see staff in the park areas he uses.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, others expressed a preference to be less visible and valued the ability to be tucked away in nature to rest and take time out.

The discomfort some unhoused individuals feel due to the presence of staff or visible stewardship activities has important implications for delivering care in parks. If spaces feel monitored or controlled, this can hinder individuals from accessing care and support and lead them to avoid those spaces. People use the public spaces where they feel safe. Therefore, park-

¹⁷⁷ Not the interviewee’s real name.

based staff play a crucial role in helping people feel comfortable using spaces by developing trust and building rapport over time.

For example, in Franklin Park, Park Ambassadors intentionally greet houseless visitors, asking how they are and whether they need any assistance. They aim to reassure people that it is okay to rest in the park and try to make everyone feel welcome. In Woodruff Park and Freeway Park, staff provide barrier-free access to services or amenities. Gabi, the Freeway Park Association's Park Operations Coordinator, repeatedly offered food and refreshments, reassuring visitors that the lunches are free, and handing out leaflets detailing local services. Interviewees from staff in all three study sites reported that they rarely call security or law enforcement to their parks, using this option only as a last resort.

It is outside the scope of this research to assess how comfortable unhoused individuals felt while using the case study parks or to evaluate how onsite staff could better communicate their intentions to make people feel secure. Connecting with certain individuals in a park setting may not always be possible. Further research would be beneficial to understand the preferences of those experiencing houselessness, including how park-based staff can help make them feel safer to access support in public spaces. This is discussed further in Chapter 16.

4. Privatization of public space management

The management of parks and other public spaces by private or non-state entities, such as BIDs, has important implications for their overall management and accessibility for different visitors. Research has linked the increasing privatization of the public realm to the erosion of local character, growth of surveillance, and heightened control of specific groups, including unhoused populations, as well as the implementation of unwelcoming measures, such as hostile

architecture, aimed at discouraging sleeping and limiting the time people spend in public spaces (Kohn, 2004; Steel & Symes, 2005; Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Petty, 2016).

The interviews in the three case study sites were informed by the potential risks associated with private organizations managing public parks. Although it was outside of the scope of this study to consider the ethics of private management of the public realm or to examine the disadvantages arising from privatization, it became evident that a notable risk to the long-term sustainability of each case study approach is if their private stakeholders no longer perceive value in their work or if there is a change in leadership.

The case study interview questions explored the enforcement of rules and regulations and the way spaces are surveilled or stewarded (and the tensions there might be between these ways of working). During fieldwork observations, I looked for hostile design interventions that discourage people from spending time in spaces. None of the parks use hostile architecture, and all include spaces where people can lie down and rest. Two of the parks, Franklin Park and Woodruff Park, have free and accessible restrooms.¹⁷⁸ The recent redesign of Franklin Park deliberately avoided park furniture that inhibits people's ability to sleep and spend time in the park, choosing instead to install large flat benches (Chapter 14).

A key observation from this research is that staff in each case study have access to assistance from private security officers. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 12, in Freeway Park, Gabi was able to contact Seneca Plaza's security team when an individual became agitated in the park. This ability to quickly reach assistance stands in contrast to many public parks managed by

¹⁷⁸ The Freeway Park re-design includes gender-neutral restroom provision.

municipal park and recreation agencies, where staff rely on local police who can be slow to respond to incidents (see Chapter 8 for SPR interviewees' experiences in Seattle).

The use of security officers to enforce standards of behavior has significant implications for the comfort levels and safety of unhoused populations using parks. The interviewees were aware of the potential risks from law enforcement for vulnerable populations using their spaces. In the case of Freeway Park, it is rare for staff to call for backup. FPA's Executive Director estimated that security had been called to the park approximately five times since 2023, one of which involved an incident with a dangerous dog rather than a person.

The challenges that private management creates in regard to public spaces were well-illustrated during the fieldwork in Washington, D.C. During a walk in the area, Cecily Mendie, the Franklin Park Manager, took me to a small park located one block away from Franklin Park, which is part of CityCenterDC, an upscale shopping mall. The weather was warm and sunny, and Franklin Park was busy with visitors, including some individuals sitting and dozing in the sun. In contrast, the park outside the mall was empty, patrolled by a private security guard. The space felt sterile and unwelcoming. Cecily wanted me to witness the difference between the two parks to emphasize the intentionality of DowntownDC's approach in welcoming all groups of people.

Finally, despite the significant risks associated with the privatization of public space management, interviews with individuals experiencing chronic houselessness in Seattle found that publicly managed spaces can also be unwelcoming. Public park and recreation staff can dictate behaviors, such as no sleeping, and enforce punitive rules that force people to leave spaces. This increasing control over vulnerable populations in the public realm is deeply concerning (Beckett and Herbert, 2010).

5. The limits of place-based care

The ability of park-based staff to effectively assist individuals experiencing houselessness is governed by important factors beyond their control, such as the availability of funding and the wider landscape of supportive services in each city. For example, the FPA depends on a grant from the City of Seattle's Food Equity Fund to provide free lunches during their programming. However, in 2025, they were unable to secure these resources. The Fund allocates grants on a rolling basis, and they ran out of money in 2025. They intend to reapply in 2026, pivoting in the meantime to provide snacks such as fruit, nuts, and energy bars.

The availability of social services significantly limits the ability of staff in the three case study sites to successfully direct people to assistance. Many of the interviewees wished there was more support available in their areas, specifically pointing out shortages in mental health services, limited shelter beds, and a lack of affordable housing. The quality of available services is often affected by a high turnover rate among staff in the houseless services sector.

Both ADID and DowntownDC were directly funding some services to try and offset gaps in local provision.¹⁷⁹ Unlike these larger organizations, the FPA in Seattle, being a small nonprofit, has access to fewer resources. While individuals experiencing houselessness can find food, water and warmth during the times Cozy Corner is open, outside of programming there is no assistance in the park, and outreach workers rarely visit the space.

High-quality care is dependent on individual staff members developing familiarity and rapport with their unhoused populations. As well as taking time, this important work can falter if

¹⁷⁹ DowntownDC funds the Day Services Center. ADID pays to reserve shelter beds and funds other services via their Client Support budget.

these staff members leave. For example, after fieldwork was completed in Freeway Park, Gabi, the Park Operations Coordinator, moved to a larger organization that offers better benefits and opportunities for career progression. Riisa, the Executive Director, noted that the FPA wished they had the resources to retain their skilled staff. Since Gabi's departure, they have noticed an impact in their ability to provide care in the park, including a loss of her expertise in engaging regular visitors and her established connections with other local agencies, built over her years of service in the park.

Summary

There are valuable lessons from the three case studies that can guide publicly funded park and recreation agencies in moving forward to provide care for the individuals experiencing houselessness who use their spaces and amenities. The three sites demonstrate what can be achieved when public space management organizations expand their understanding of the community they serve to include individuals experiencing houselessness. They have moved away from enforcement-driven management activities and work on a broader level, extending their role and responsibilities, forming new partnerships, and offering new activities.

The three case study approaches do not segregate services based on need. Their programs and services are open to anyone who visits their spaces. Stewardship of the three parks involves actively balancing the diverse needs of users. It requires skill. The three parks are well-used, visited by different groups of people who can have competing needs. Interviewees shared the personal benefits from providing park-based care, noting it can make their job easier as they become more familiar with the people regularly present in their spaces, understanding their needs and personalities, and that respect flows both ways as connections are made.

In common with the SPR interviewees, the case study participants highlighted the impossibility of centering everyone's needs and the tensions that arise from managing a finite public resource. Often, the unhoused individuals using spaces require more resources than are currently available. The three case studies illustrate that park-based care is not a panacea. It should be one tool among a broader set of strategies to engage and assist individuals experiencing houselessness.

Successful place- and park-based care requires proper funding, long-term commitment, and strong leadership. Place-based care is not a quick fix; it entails commitment and effort to understand the needs of individuals using spaces. It can be fragile and highly dependent on personal relationships as well as the wider availability of social support services. Frequently, work can be messy or incomplete, as people experiencing houselessness may move on, and successful outcomes are not guaranteed.

Despite these complexities and challenges, the individuals within the three case study organizations are pragmatically finding a way forward, guided by what feels right or ethical, emphasizing the rewards of their work. The individual examples of expressions of care in each of the three cases can be modest. Localized caring action might not appear radical or revolutionary, but in some ways it is. It is a pivot from conventional approaches to yield notably different outcomes. Frequently, it rests on small gestures, such as a simple hello, and on treating park users with kindness and respect to build trust. Yet collectively, these actions can have a powerful positive impact on the well-being and quality of life for individuals experiencing houselessness, challenging their stigmatization, and promoting the importance of focusing on this community and getting to know their needs. By utilizing public parks, recreational spaces, and amenities,

individuals experiencing houselessness can gain valuable benefits and become more integrated into the communities where they live.

The three case study sites are common spaces, aiming to provide a convivial, inviting, and welcoming environment for every visitor. They demonstrate that care situated in park environments can offer benefits to everyone. The next chapter further discusses place- and park-based care and the opportunities it presents for public park and recreation agencies in better responding to the needs of marginalized individuals while still providing high-quality spaces and amenities for other groups in society.

Chapter 16: Place-Based Care in Public Park Management and Recreation Service Delivery

Overview

Houselessness in the United States is at its highest level ever and is expected to continue rising (Flaming et al., 2021; Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Although public parks were not originally designed to meet the daily shelter and survival needs of individuals, they have become essential resources for those experiencing houselessness. As a result, public park and recreation agencies are increasingly taking on the role of frontline responder to the extensive challenges associated with houselessness (NRPA, 2017b). This chapter further discusses the potential of place-based care to transform public park management and recreation services. It examines how public park and recreation agencies can adapt their management and service delivery models to create more caring services and contribute to making places more inclusive and socially just.

This study examines the question: “What could an ethic of care look like in the management of public parks and the delivery of recreation services in the context of houselessness?” There is a lack of research focusing on public parks as environments or spaces that can provide care for marginalized communities. The importance of place - and public space in particular - in relation to the practice of care is often overlooked in the care literature, although in recent years urban geographers have explored the spatial relations produced by, and through, care (Phillips, 2007; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024).

Interviews with 70 individuals across three cities – Atlanta, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., – provide a rich and comprehensive picture of the challenging realities of delivering public

parks and recreation services amid extreme poverty and systemic structural injustice. In Seattle, interviewees expressed a heavy sense of responsibility to respond to these challenges, often making complex and difficult judgments without coordinated guidance, support, or training related to houselessness. Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) provides services such as free showers and overnight shelter that are utilized by individuals experiencing houselessness. Additionally, SPR staff shared examples of their personal efforts to meet the needs of the unhoused, though these care activities are often reactive, ad hoc, and fragmented. The city's State of Emergency for houselessness has persisted for over a decade, and although this situation remains critical for individuals without shelter, new or innovative responses from SPR do not seem forthcoming.

Three case studies of park-based care in Seattle, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. offer positive examples of alternative approaches that seek to break the cycle of short-term, crisis-driven responses to issues related to houselessness in their park spaces. In each site, the care practices situated within, and enacted through, public parks successfully engage with hard-to-reach, marginalized communities. These approaches have moved away from enforcement-oriented responses to better utilize parks and amenities in support of individuals experiencing houselessness while also ensuring that the parks are well-maintained and enjoyable for the wider community.

This final chapter further explores place-based care in public park management and recreation service delivery. It outlines the key elements of place-based care and explores the complexities of grounding urban park and recreation services in a commitment to care. Seven recommendations are provided in this study to help public park and recreation agencies advance

their goals for place-based care. These recommendations aim to shape and inform future planning and strategies regarding issues related to houselessness. The chapter also identifies areas for future research, highlighting important evidence gaps and promising avenues for further exploration. It concludes with reflections on the future of place-based care in public park management and recreation service delivery.

Place-Based Care in Parks and Recreation Amenities

Place-based care refers to the care practices that are situated within and actively enacted through public spaces.¹⁸⁰ Cities are shaped and driven by local public policies and strategies (Mallach, 2018). However, considerations of care are generally not central to public policy, and the potential role of public park and recreation agencies to support solutions to houselessness has received limited attention (Phillips, 2007). Nonetheless, it is a core responsibility of publicly funded park and recreation agencies to manage and deliver their spaces and amenities equitably for all community members, including those experiencing houselessness (NRPA, 2012).

In the United States, individuals experiencing houselessness in public spaces are increasingly criminalized. Strategies by public park and recreation agencies often attempt to restrict or deter their use of parks, for example, closing park spaces or adopting enforcement-oriented approaches (Beckett & Herbert, 2010; Neild & Rose, 2018; Rose, 2019; Speer & Goldfischer, 2020; Pitas et al., 2025b). These enforcement-oriented responses have led to some public parks becoming hostile environments for those who are unhoused, penalizing them for meeting their basic survival needs (Roy, 2003; Mitchell, 2011; Speer & Goldfischer, 2020). In

¹⁸⁰ Park-based care refers to the care practices that are situated within, and actively enacted through, public parks.

contrast, place-based care – specifically park-based care – entails using park environments as venues to provide care and assistance to marginalized communities. Place-based care invites individuals to participate and claim their right to the city (Mitchell, 2003; Berney, 2019).

Managers of public parks and recreation services are well-positioned to support individuals experiencing houselessness. Contemporary public park and recreation agencies are essential components of social infrastructure, contributing actively to the creation of healthy, connected, and resilient communities (Klinenberg, 2018). Using public parks and recreation facilities as venues of care is a role for these spaces that goes beyond the provision of recreational activities. Interventions in public parks or recreation amenities offer opportunities to tackle issues at their roots, reaching people in the spaces they already frequent to offer support and assistance (PPS, 2025).

The theoretical framework of an ethic of care provides a valuable perspective by prompting questions about our responsibility to others. While care alone cannot solve the structural causes of houselessness, it provides a framework for navigating equal claims to public spaces. It encourages consideration of what individuals experiencing houselessness need to participate in society. An ethic of care is action-based, it goes beyond good intentions and requires skills, expertise, and judgment (Tronto, 1993, p. 136; Cohen & Knierbein, 2021). The transformative potential of care is maximized when combined with an ethic of justice, for instance, through spatial practices of redistribution such as providing goods and services like food, clothing, or rental assistance (Williams 2017, p. 830; Gabauer et al., 2021). Such synergistic efforts are especially appropriate in the context of complex, persistent issues like houselessness.

Place-based care practices are facilitated through high-quality, practical, non-hierarchical interactions with individuals in the spaces they already frequent, rather than expecting them to travel to seek support elsewhere. Place-based care is ongoing and deliberate, relying on repeated, low-stakes contact to build trust and rapport. These relational practices can foster empathic warmth, further supporting individuals experiencing houselessness (Conradson, 2003a).

Place-based care shifts the focus away from formal office environments and may increase the likelihood of reaching marginalized groups, particularly those experiencing chronic houselessness, who may be less likely to travel to alternative locations to connect with support services. Care delivered through public parks represents a broader use of these spaces beyond pure recreation, a role that is deeply ingrained in the public imaginary. Through its welcoming and supportive acts, park-based care enhances the resilience and inclusivity of public parks, making them common spaces accessible to all populations.

Actions to Implement Place-Based Care

Place-based care responds to local circumstances and the needs of those utilizing spaces. The activities in the three case studies are flexible and adaptive. Each case study site implemented most, if not all, of the actions outlined in Figure 16.1 below. These activities comprise the key ingredients of place-based care.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ In Woodruff Park, Atlanta, services are primarily delivered through ADID's Supportive Services Team. They have not focused on developing the local park and recreation staff's knowledge of available local services for individuals experiencing houselessness.

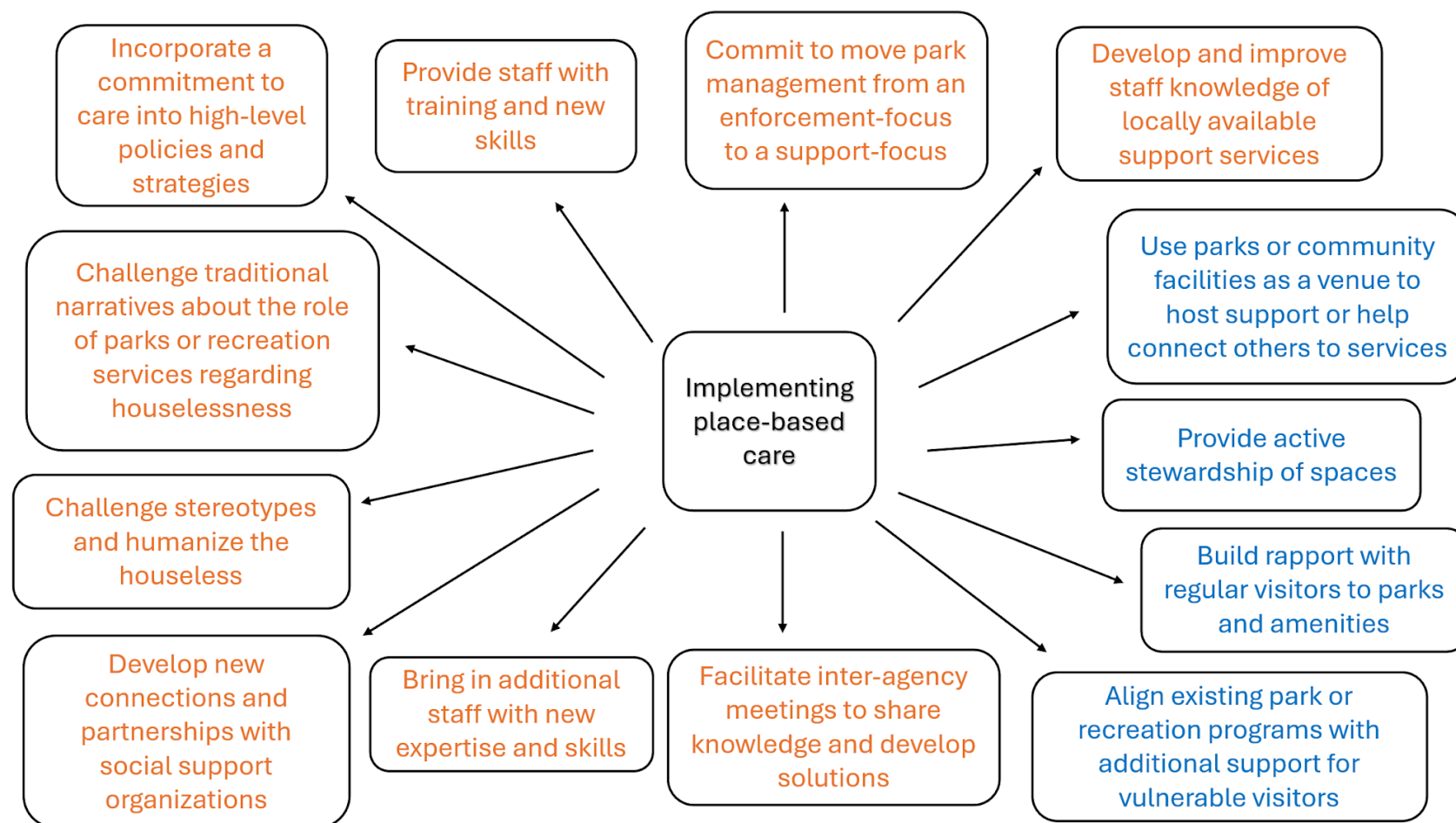
Figure 16.1 includes immediate, small-scale, on-the-ground responses (indicated by blue font in the figure) as well as broader or longer-term, strategic responses at a higher, structural level (orange font). On-the-ground actions may include aligning existing park programs, such as showers or summer lunches for schoolchildren, with additional wraparound support, for example, providing free soap and hygiene supplies, laundry services, and information about local social services. Other localized actions could include hosting social workers in the public parks or recreation centers frequented by individuals experiencing houselessness. Or, within the park and recreation spaces used most by those in need, establishing community clothing or food pantries, hosting mobile medical services or hygiene units, or providing blankets and basic necessities like drinks and snacks.

At a higher level, the focus shifts to developing new partnerships and collaborating with various local agencies to share knowledge and resources. This involves considering potential responses and building a consensus on the way forward. Such higher-level approaches might include implementing training and skills development programs for park and recreation staff, and bringing in new expertise, possibly by creating a dedicated role within park agencies to deal with houselessness, an approach adopted by some public libraries such as San Francisco Public Library (CA), Seattle Central Library (WA), and Queens Library (NY) (American Library Association, n.d.).

Additionally, these approaches may also include actively working to challenge outdated narratives regarding the role of parks in relation to houselessness and to combat stereotypes about individuals experiencing houselessness. The effective communication of new ways of

working, and wider advocacy for the rights of houseless individuals using spaces and amenities is crucial.

Figure 16.1: Key Actions for Implementing Place-Based Care¹⁸²



¹⁸² Immediate, small-scale, on-the-ground responses are in blue font, and broader or longer-term, strategic responses are in orange font.

Practicalities of Delivering Place-Based Care

Place-based care is an emergent approach. This study highlights three successful case studies that illustrate how place-based care activities effectively respond to the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness in their spaces. Implementing place-based care requires intentional effort to assess needs, develop strategies, plan, and deliver appropriate care responses. This section outlines key practical considerations for situating care and support in public spaces.

Many of these challenges reflect the broader complexities of delivering care, which are well-documented in the ethic of care literature. Additional challenges are specific to the delivery of place-based care by public park and recreation agencies. Beyond this research, there is a lack of investigation into the use of public spaces as venues for care activities. The section below indicates findings from this research that assist in overcoming these challenges, and a later section of this chapter outlines useful areas for future research.

Challenges: Place-based care

Place-based care is not a structural solution; rather, it embodies an ethos or a set of values guiding responses to those in need of support or assistance within public spaces. It works in tandem with broader structural changes, such as measures to reduce poverty, inequity, or build affordable housing, and does not replace these initiatives. Place-based care relies on the willingness of institutions to intentionally consider and address the needs of marginalized populations. Care responses are shaped by assessments of these needs, which can sometimes conflict or prioritize the care for one group over another. Thus, care activities are not inherently positive; they can be complex and involve power dynamics. (Tronto, 1993, 2010).

Due to the relational social ontology of care, which emphasizes our interconnectedness as humans, an ethic of care is well-suited to explore the realities of competing needs by asking questions about our responsibilities to others in society. An ethic of care challenges damaging constructions of other communities as radically different from us and shifts focus from rights that are in competition to our mutual needs and relationality (Manzo et al., in press). However, place-based care does not automatically prioritize the interests of marginalized communities. There can be multiple competing interpretations of care needs, depending on who is conducting the assessment and their motivations. Other stewards or managers of public spaces may prioritize the needs of different groups, such as local workers or housed residents, if they believe those needs are more pressing. The increasing criminalization of unhoused individuals and policies that forcibly remove individuals experiencing houselessness from public spaces, such as encampment removals, demonstrate alternative prioritizations.

In the Seattle case study, the Freeway Park Association (FPA) historically operated with an enforcement-oriented mindset to ensure that Freeway Park remained “clean and safe.” It required farsighted leadership and a commitment to educating staff and stakeholders about houselessness, to drive culture change toward situated care practices in the park. The FPA sought this change because they recognized that the punitive strategies were detrimental to the unhoused individuals using the space and these imbalances were degrading the visit experience for other users.

Two of the three case study sites are Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). BIDs focus on enhancing the economic vitality of downtown areas. Chapter 15 explored whether place-based care aligns with their broader mission. Although ADID (Chapter 13) and DowntownDC (Chapter 14) have chosen to address the needs of individuals experiencing houselessness in their

parks – understanding the value of doing so – this does not imply that other business-oriented public management entities will automatically adopt similar approaches.

A significant risk associated with place-based care, as noted in the ethic of care literature, is the potential of paternalism and problematic assumptions regarding the vulnerability of others (Tronto, 1993, 2010; Gabauer et al., 2021). Care practices within these spaces may not align with the preferences of unhoused individuals. Chapter 10 examined the perspectives of interviewees experiencing chronic houselessness and found that some viewed being left alone in public parks as an act of care. They preferred quiet and unstaffed park spaces where they could go about their lives with some privacy. In contrast, the three case study sites include active stewardship with visible onsite staff interacting with the park users.

The benefits of the place-based approaches illustrated in each case study site highlight the advantages and complexities of using public spaces as venues for care. David Conradson (2003) cautions against uncritical affirmations of care environments. His research on urban spaces of care focused on a community drop-in center, revealing that such environments are not always harmonious or a positive experience for every visitor (p. 521). The upcoming section on areas for future research emphasizes the importance of learning more about the preferences of the different groups that use public parks.

Challenges: Place-Based Care in Public Parks and Recreation

The professionals interviewed for this study emphasized that they are public servants motivated to serve their communities, noting that public park and recreation agencies have a history of serving vulnerable populations. However, it remains unclear whether U.S. public park and recreation agencies would like to change and adapt their operational models in response to

the issue of houselessness. Many contemporary public park and recreation agencies operate in challenging circumstances including growing inequities, a changing climate, and significant funding cuts or delays to grant funding (NRPA, 2022; PPS, 2025). At the same time, houselessness presents a classic wicked problem with no easy or quick solutions, often accompanied by little agreement about the best way forward (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010).

Place-based care is not a quick fix. Implementing place-based care involves intentional, active, and practical solutions designed to meet needs. As mentioned earlier, assessments of need are not automatically in the interests of marginalized populations. Determining the best course of action can feel overwhelming for public park and recreation agencies, which may already be operating at full capacity or feeling stretched responding to individuals experiencing crises in their spaces and amenities (Chapter 8). Furthermore, public parks are complex spaces, shaped by historical, and present day, social, political, and economic forces or agendas (Cranz, 1982; Ruddick 1996; Ackerman, 2003; Razack, 2007). The Seattle Parks and Recreation interviewees report struggling to reconcile traditional expectations for public park and recreation amenities with the needs of a broader range of individuals at various stages of life.

Place-based care efforts can be fragile within the wider context of other efforts to respond to houselessness. For example, fieldwork in Seattle revealed that the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) once had a well-regarded outreach team of about 10 trained professionals who assisted individuals experiencing houselessness in downtown Seattle by connecting them to support and social services.¹⁸³ However, the DSA team was disbanded when the City of Seattle and King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) launched an ambitious, \$10

¹⁸³ The DSA is funded by Seattle's Metropolitan Improvement District, a Business Improvement District. <https://downtownseattle.org/about/>

million outreach project called Partnership for Zero (see Chapter 6 and Appendix I) aimed at reducing unsheltered houselessness in Seattle's downtown and the Chinatown-International District areas to 30 or fewer people (Sun, 2022). Unfortunately, Partnership for Zero was terminated by the KCRHA in 2023 due to disappointing results (KCRHA, 2023d). The DSA has not re-established its outreach team since then.

The DSA disbanded its team to avoid duplicating efforts in downtown Seattle. In contrast, the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) operates its Supportive Services Outreach Team in Woodruff Park and surrounding downtown areas as one of multiple initiatives aimed at assisting unhoused populations in the same space. Confusing local care landscapes were a common challenge reported by interviewees in each case study city. To enhance their efforts and increase the likelihood of fruitful outcomes, the case study interviewees proactively developed partnerships with other organizations addressing houselessness to better understand available services. These partnerships improved the chances of their efforts being synergistic rather than inefficient. It is appropriate that the provision of place-based care is one approach out of many in response to houselessness--a complex problem requiring multiple solutions.

Place-based care demands a deeper and longer-term commitment to implementing structured, thoughtful interventions. For park or community center managers, this longer-term commitment might feel frustratingly slow, especially when they are under pressure to deliver immediate results related to cleanliness and safety. Additionally, they may lack the resources to have staff regularly on-site in their parks. Effective place-based care therefore relies on leadership commitment and an understanding that care takes time. It requires proper resourcing, training, and skills development for park and recreation professionals. As well as forming

partnerships with organizations that have expertise in supporting individuals experiencing houselessness.

The three case study sites demonstrate a move away from knee-jerk, enforcement-oriented models of management towards a compassionate understanding of the individuals using their spaces. Each organization has prioritized focusing on unhoused populations, emphasizing the importance of exploring their needs. The case study sites have committed to trying in the absence of concrete evidence about place-based care, learning as they go, acknowledging that progress can be halting, and multiple attempts may be necessary to assist individuals experiencing houselessness. Successful outcomes are not guaranteed.

It remains unclear whether the U.S. public park and recreation field has the appetite or capacity to broaden its focus and adopt place-based care approaches. On one hand, public institutions, such as park and recreation agencies, typically support long-term initiatives and deliver multi-year programs. These agencies have the autonomy to change their management and service delivery models. It is within their scope as publicly funded agencies to re-examine their policies and practices to intentionally prioritize care. On the other hand, external factors, such as the local political climate, lobbying from residents, and insecure or short-term funding can create significant pressures that hinder the adoption of new or innovative working methods.

A key challenge is securing sufficient resources for place-based care activities, especially given the wider context of diminishing funding for public parks. While investment in urban parks has significantly increased in recent years, the costs associated with deferred maintenance in municipal parks continue to rise alongside significant uncertainties surrounding federal funding for public parks and recreation (ASCE, 2025; PPS, 2025). More research is needed to demonstrate the value of place-based care approaches, including the cost savings these activities

can provide in other areas, such as reducing the need for enforcement and policing in parks, as well as the benefits of connecting marginalized individuals to supportive services. A later section in this chapter discusses where additional evidence and research could help publicly funded institutions better understand the benefits of place-based care.

Recommendations

The seven recommendations below offer guidance for public park and recreation agencies on how to adapt and respond to the issue of houselessness. They advocate for structured, strategic, and long-term approaches rooted in place-based practices of care. These recommendations aim to enhance agencies' ability to respond effectively while safeguarding staff well-being and establishing clear boundaries and direction regarding houselessness for park and recreation services. Collectively, the recommendations support public park and recreation agencies in transitioning from improvisation to intentionality, informed by defined policies and bolstered by resources and partnerships.

The recommendations are based on insights gathered from fieldwork, including the perspectives and ideas of interview participants. However, they are applicable to any public park and recreation agency seeking to implement more empathetic and caring responses to marginalized individuals utilizing their spaces.

1. Articulate and understand the challenges of working amid houselessness

A crucial first step in determining the future direction of public park and recreation services in relation to houselessness is to understand the conditions faced by staff working in parks and community centers frequented by individuals experiencing houselessness. Clearly articulating these challenges will help build a thorough understanding of the challenges and barriers faced,

identify gaps in skills and training, highlight areas where additional resources are needed, and spark discussions about potential new approaches.

Taking stock of the impact on services and amenities will help identify the most affected areas, the issues staff need assistance with, and where to direct additional resources effectively. Understanding which spaces and amenities are under the most strain due to issues related to homelessness will facilitate more strategic responses and longer-term development of targeted activities. Additionally, consulting with on-site staff can foster consensus on the way forward and encourage broader staff engagement regarding homelessness and its effects on parks and recreation.

2. Clearly define the mission of public park and recreation services in the context of homelessness

It is essential for park and recreation agencies to clearly define their role in the context of homelessness and to establish an agreed strategic direction, supported by adequate resources and aligned with relevant guidance and policies. The roles and strategic direction will vary based on the characteristics of the agency, including its location, size, budget, and other specific factors, as well as the needs of the unhoused populations it serves.

A key theme that emerged from the fieldwork is that the SPR participants feel conflicted about their mission in the context of homelessness and how their responses might align with their roles and responsibilities. They report working without guidance or clear expectations from management, responding in an ad hoc manner, driven by a sense of personal responsibility rather than a defined professional duty. Many of the professional interviewees believe that it falls within their role to respond but are uncertain about the best approach to take.

Without a systemic framework and clarity of scope, staff will continue to improvise, stepping into situations for which they are unqualified, placing both themselves and individuals experiencing houselessness in concerning or vulnerable positions. Clearly defining the mission of public park and recreation services will provide on-the-ground staff with the clarity required to move forward and plan appropriate responses for parks and amenities that may require additional support in the future.

3. Maintain communication between leadership and staff working on the ground

In centers and amenities addressing issues related to houselessness, it is vital to establish and maintain effective communication between on-the-ground staff and upper management. Bridging the gap between different levels of staff can improve morale, reduce risk, and help develop better-informed policies and responses that are grounded in the experiences of those working in these environments.

A significant challenge reported by the SPR interviewees is the perceived disconnect with leadership. This disconnect heightens stress and reduces effectiveness, leaving staff, who are facing challenging situations, feeling unsupported and unheard. For example, staff at shower programs experience stress due to the high demand for these facilities, maintenance staff feel overwhelmed by the impacts on parks being used as shelter, and front-desk staff in centers deal with visitors who have complex mental health needs.

Building and sustaining regular lines of communication keeps leadership informed. Frequent visits to the most affected parks and community centers will enable those in leadership roles to understand where additional support is needed, including measures to support staff well-being.

Such visits can also foster empathetic connections, as management gains a deeper understanding of the realities faced by frontline staff.

4. Conduct an audit of skills and knowledge deficits

Conducting an audit of reported skills and knowledge deficits will help identify areas requiring additional workforce development and training, as well as where it is appropriate to bring in additional specialized expertise.

The SPR interviewees expressed a clear need for improved skills and training, noting that they lack a background in social support or a familiarity with the specific services available to the unhoused. Without this basic knowledge, SPR staff reported feeling powerless and out of their depth when approached by park or amenity visitors seeking assistance. While some colleagues have developed basic skills or connections with relevant social support organizations over time, the value of this knowledge is not currently included in standard job descriptions or role responsibilities.

Participants specifically mentioned the need for training in de-escalation techniques, communication strategies with individuals experiencing mental health issues, an understanding of the reasons behind houselessness, and the systemic causes of the issue. They also highlighted the need for more information on available support services for those experiencing houselessness and the relevant organizations to contact for assistance.

5. Establish connections and partnerships with social support organizations

Park and recreation professionals are often required to build partnerships and already collaborate with a wide range of organizations outside their field. By establishing connections and partnerships with social support organizations specializing in serving individuals

experiencing houselessness, park and recreation agencies can access additional assistance for their spaces and amenities that need it most.

Staff in public parks and recreation facilities are often well-acquainted with regular visitors and may have valuable insights into the supportive services those individuals may need. They are well-placed to connect with social service organizations to facilitate appropriate assistance. Interviewees in Seattle who work in outreach and support for individuals experiencing houselessness stated that public park and recreation agencies do not need to reinvent the wheel; established sources of help already exist. Instead, it is about making the right connections. Engaging organizations with expertise in crisis intervention, case management, and service provision can enable park and recreation agencies to access valuable resources to help coordinate support for the individuals in their spaces.

A common challenge in supporting those experiencing houselessness is the high turnover among staff in outreach and case management roles. By developing a better understanding of which organizations to connect with, park agencies can ensure a stable connection to expertise and supportive services, regardless of individual staff changes.

Public park and recreation agencies can leverage their status as important publicly funded entities to bring the right organizations together and drive the establishment of new partnerships. For example, by organizing and facilitating meetings with other local organizations to promote information sharing and new collaborative activities in response to houselessness.

6. Provide care for frontline staff

It is crucial to safeguard the well-being and safety of public park and recreation staff who work in the spaces and amenities that are struggling with issues relating to houselessness. The

provision of such care and support is particularly important for those who regularly interact with individuals in need or are present in spaces heavily used by those experiencing houselessness. For example, park maintenance professionals, front desk staff in community centers, and staff working to activate or steward spaces, such as Park Concierges.

Care runs in multiple directions. Individuals experiencing houselessness in public spaces are among the most politically and economically vulnerable groups in society (Koprowska et al., 2020). At the same time, the SPR interviewees reported a significant emotional toll in trying to respond to the significant needs of the individuals they encounter. Some express feelings of burnout and are considering leaving their roles. Additionally, SPR staff face the high cost of living in Seattle, with some experiencing housing insecurity and the risk of houselessness themselves. Therefore, it is imperative for public park and recreation agencies to implement appropriate, long-term support for their staff. For example, this could include counseling services, stress management support, and trauma-informed programs that offer coping strategies and provide compassionate assistance.

7. Explore alternative ways to respond to houselessness

Within park and recreation amenities particularly affected by issues related to houselessness, it would be beneficial to consider implementing alternative service models or exploring the potential to create new structures. For example, one SPR interviewee suggested establishing a dedicated team focused solely on responses to houselessness.

As discussed in Chapter 11, there is significant potential for public park and recreation agencies to better utilize their amenities. Some SPR interviewees discussed the potential benefits of adopting multi-service models in community centers that integrate essential services, such as

shower and laundry facilities, along with the support of a social worker or case manager to help individuals connect with social services. Implementing pilot projects to test these new, care-based approaches would be a valuable way to assess their feasibility.

Seattle Public Libraries have adapted their approach in response to the increasing number of individuals experiencing houselessness who utilize their facilities. They have hired a Social Services Librarian and host Community Resource Specialists at the Seattle Central Library (Ali, 2017).¹⁸⁴ Creating a specialized houselessness-response division, or hiring additional staff with expertise in houselessness within public park and recreation agencies, could enable these organizations to maintain their core services while enhancing their capacity to provide support to individuals requiring additional assistance.

Areas for Future Research

In recent years, urban geographers have explored the complex spatial context of care. However, little research has focused on the role of public parks as caring environments for marginalized populations (Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). Additionally, the management and maintenance of public spaces are frequently neglected in academic studies (Duivenvoorden et al., 2021). There is also a notable lack of comprehensive research regarding how public park and recreation agencies respond to houselessness, which was also discussed in Chapter 3.

This study identifies six areas for further research that would enhance understanding of the benefits of place-based care. This research could help the managers of public spaces better demonstrate the value of new or innovative approaches. Further investigation in these six areas would also contribute to the literature on the ethic of care, specifically regarding the potential of

¹⁸⁴ www.spl.org/programs-and-services/civics-and-social-services/social-services-referrals

place-based care practices to foster socially just places, and the overall role of the public realm, and its management practices, in serving the public good.

1. Develop the evidence base regarding place-based care approaches

More research is needed to develop the evidence base regarding place-based care. This study presents three case study examples from Seattle, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., selected after an extensive literature review because they provide well-developed practices of place-based care. It is likely that there are other active place-based care initiatives in the United States (and elsewhere) that were not uncovered in the literature review. Identifying more examples will enhance understanding of the different ways to structure and deliver place-based care, along with their respective advantages and disadvantages.

The case studies in this dissertation do not collect much data through performance measures to evaluate their outcomes. The evidence on place-based care approaches to parks management would be strengthened with quantitative data measured by specific indicators relevant to the specific place-based care approach. This performance data could include tracking the number of individuals engaged, their enrollment with case managers, referrals to support or employment services, and successful placements in shelters or permanent housing. Examples of other place-based care initiatives would also be strengthened by the inclusion of relevant performance data.

Although this study concentrates on public parks and recreation, other publicly funded agencies may offer valuable insights into place-based care. For instance, as mentioned earlier, staff at some public libraries have begun connecting unhoused visitors with social services and community resources. Furthermore, during the initial planning of their supportive outreach response, members of ADID (Atlanta) visited the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) in Houston,

Texas, to learn about their approach. HOT delivers street-based outreach through collaboration between Houston Police Officers and mental health case managers to engage individuals experiencing chronic houselessness. Although HOT's approach falls outside the scope of this study, it may still be relevant for others seeking information on place-based responses to houselessness.¹⁸⁵

2. Investigate preferences regarding care among individuals experiencing houselessness and the wider public

Research would be beneficial to understand public preferences regarding place-based care responses by public park and recreation agencies. Specifically, the care preferences of individuals experiencing houselessness, including those who regularly use public parks and recreation amenities to meet their shelter and survival needs, and housed members of the wider public.

The perspectives of marginalized groups, such as those experiencing houselessness, are often missing or undervalued in academic research (Van Loon, 2025; Malik et al., 2024; Callahan, 2019). This study includes interviews with 11 individuals experiencing houselessness.¹⁸⁶ Some participants indicated that their ideal form of care involves being left alone in park spaces. These interviewees expressed wariness towards park staff due to negative past encounters. It is therefore unclear if place-based care is suitable for everyone. Further research is necessary to understand the preferences of unhoused individuals regarding place-based care. For example,

¹⁸⁵ It was outside of this study's scope due to its focus on street-based outreach (rather than public parks) and the involvement of the police. This study sought case studies driven by place-management organizations. More information on HOT: www.houstoncit.org/hot/

¹⁸⁶ One interviewee has subsequently moved into stable housing. The status of the other 10 is not known.

what services would be of most value or use, what factors might make them feel comfortable utilizing public spaces with an active staff presence, and what specific activities could help meet their long-term needs?

Additional research is also needed to better understand public opinions on care-based activities in public parks and recreation amenities. Chapter 3 explores existing evidence on public attitudes toward park and recreation agencies taking action to support individuals experiencing houselessness (Pitas et al., 2023, 2025a, 2025b; Mullenbach et al., 2024). While overall public attitudes appear broadly positive, these findings are nuanced and sometimes contradictory. Potential areas for new research include exploring attitudes toward a greater emphasis on care from these agencies, the specific responses they should adopt, and perspectives on place-based care in relation to houselessness.

3. Examine how the specific characteristics of spatial contexts influence care

Power and Williams (2019) discuss recent shifts in conceptualizations of care towards focusing on the “materialities of care,” – how materials, objects, and items in spaces influence and shape the delivery and provision of care (p. 3). Research on the influence of specific characteristics of public parks and recreation amenities, such as their design and layout, would enhance understanding of place-based care, and the influence of different spaces on the provision of care.

For example, some SPR interviewees mentioned the influence of the quality of their community center’s design on accessibility and safety. One Community Center Manager emphasized the importance of high-quality, clean facilities that convey a sense of welcome and care to visitors. Another manager highlighted that clear lines of sight within community centers

contribute to people feeling safe. Additionally, the design of restrooms and the influence of this on the ability to ensure safe and sanitary conditions were also identified as important by interviewees.

In this study's case study of Franklin Park, Washington, D.C., the provision of large, wide, flat benches was highlighted as an important aspect of Downtown DC's caring park management. These benches offer visitors a comfortable place to sit, relax, and sleep, providing a valuable resource for unhoused individuals who lack similar opportunities elsewhere.

Further research into the materialities of care will help develop practical knowledge for place managers seeking to establish welcoming, caring, and inclusive public environments. As well as providing more information on the role of public space architects and designers in facilitating caring places.

4. Explore the idea of “reciprocal care” and its potential to enhance place-based care

Interviews with individuals experiencing houselessness, along with the Freeway Park (Seattle) and Franklin Park (Washington, D.C.) case studies highlighted the efforts of the unhoused to care for the spaces they use. Most of the houseless participants expressed a desire for clean and well-maintained public parks, and some actively engage in their own acts of care, such as picking up trash in these spaces. Further research into these activities could reveal their potential to strengthen place-based care.

The acts of care by individuals experiencing houselessness were sometimes reciprocal. For example, during the Cozy Corner program in Freeway Park, participants would clear away their trash and lunch items. Sometimes individuals helped to stack chairs. Acts of care can reinforce other acts. For instance, the Franklin Park Supervisor reported that caring park management

makes his job easier. By treating the houseless individuals visiting the park with respect, they are more likely to respond positively, follow park rules, and keep the area clean.

Additional research into reciprocal care, as well as the everyday acts of care that support high-quality and welcoming public spaces, would assist in developing an understanding of the benefits of place-based care.

5. Increase knowledge of the core skills and capabilities for care

Tronto (1993) notes that care requires skills and expertise. A recurring theme among the SPR interviewees was the lack of necessary training and knowledge to work effectively in the context of houselessness. This study suggests that practical training in areas such as de-escalation techniques, stress management, education on the causes of houselessness, and awareness of local social service providers would be beneficial. However, more research is needed to identify the essential skills for delivering place-based care.

This study did not determine the core capabilities or skillsets for effective care. Some interviewees emphasized the value of recruiting naturally compassionate or empathetic staff. It remains unclear whether anyone can be trained to provide care or if certain innate qualities or aptitudes are beneficial. It is also uncertain whether hiring staff with social work expertise is preferable to those with community-building skills and experience, or if a combination of both would be most effective. Place-based care is an emergent area of analysis. Further investigation into the necessary skills will therefore enhance approaches and ensure care responses address the need.

6. Examine the scaling up or institutionalization of place-based care

More research is necessary to explore whether place-based care strategies can be effectively implemented on a larger scale. Two of the examples of place-based care in this study are small-scale initiatives operating at the level of the park (Freeway Park), or its immediate vicinity (Franklin Park). However, the third case study, supportive outreach by ADID in Atlanta started in Woodruff Park, but subsequently expanded to cover 220 blocks (1.7 miles). The scaling up, or institutionalization, of place-based care raises important questions.

The issue of scale is vital. It may be that place-based care works better in smaller or less bureaucratic organizations. If institutionalized, there is a risk that place-based care could lose its ability to be nimble and flexible to respond to different needs. Additionally, scaling up may lead to a diminished human connection, or care efforts may become constrained by the wider rules and policies of organizations.

Research by Tronto (1990), Sevenhuijsen (2003), and Lawson (2007) examines the potential of an ethic of care in challenging policies that marginalize vulnerable individuals and in promoting new institutional forms that embody social responsibility in their professional practices. Further exploration of the institutionalization of place-based care by public parks and recreation institutions could contribute to this important analysis. Enhancing understanding of how public spaces can address injustice and improve the well-being of marginalized populations will highlight the power of place-based care and its applicability to other contexts.

Final Thoughts

This research was driven by a strong belief that our public parks and recreation amenities can offer more to individuals experiencing houselessness, and that with the right support, skills, and resources, this vision is appropriate and feasible. To some of the SPR interviewees, the impact of houselessness feels like an ongoing battle; yet place-based care is the opposite of fighting. It is a different way of working rooted in the understanding that we are all interconnected as humans, and our public services have a responsibility to respond to the needs of society's most marginalized.

Over the course of conducting this research, I encountered the generosity and open-mindedness of the public park and recreation profession. Many in this field engaged with my ideas, even if they did not always agree, willing to meet and discuss their experiences. I was invited to speak at four large park-focused events, allowing me to refine and rehearse my ideas in front of diverse audiences – some with receptive, friendly faces, some with skeptical expressions. Eleven individuals experiencing chronic houselessness kindly sat down with me and shared their perspectives, explaining what public parks mean for them, even though many felt that hope for outside assistance was elusive. Individuals working for nonprofits, outreach and social services, and in other demanding roles took time from their busy schedules to illustrate the vital importance of public parks and recreation services and how they could respond more effectively to houselessness.

In these conversations, there was an openness to change, accompanied by deep, intense exhaustion. Public parks and recreation is special, unlike any other public service, it tackles every societal challenge. It is uniquely positioned to positively impact those who need it the

most. During the pandemic, public park and recreation professionals were there, working around the clock to help communities, quickly adapting to urgent needs. As they recover from this public health crisis, they are still facing the crisis of houselessness. This crisis raises critical questions: Is this yet another substantial issue for public park and recreation professionals to manage? Where is the necessary support, respect, and prioritization from leadership and other city departments? Why does it feel like our public park spaces are under threat?

Listening to SPR professionals describe the heavy toll of houselessness was deeply moving; many feel a weight of responsibility and go home anxious and stressed. It was heartbreaking to hear the experiences of people who rely on public parks for shelter, struggling daily to find access to restrooms, water, and privacy. They recognize the damage encampments cause to public parks, and they strive to care for these spaces while facing criminalization for fulfilling their basic needs.

However, in my conversations with the case study participants, there was a lightness, a sense of purpose, and hope. Riisa, Gabi, Cecily, Nakasha, and others in Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta have decided to reject punitive approaches that seek to control marginalized communities, moving away from the cycle of calling the police to attend to people who have nowhere else to go. While working in parks used frequently by unhoused individuals, these inspiring individuals are not deploying war language to describe their efforts. They are engaging and supporting others. Their care-based responses are evolving and adapting; they are learning as they go, understanding that success may not always be clear-cut given the complexity of houselessness.

Throughout the fieldwork of this study, I learned that sometimes the commitment to try is better than doing nothing. Many of the fears expressed by the SPR interviewees have not come

to pass in the case study sites; their parks are not overwhelmed, continuing to be welcoming and pleasant environments for everyone. The three case study sites have managed to maintain that critical balance.

In many ways, punitive approaches to public space management can seem easier. They are rigid, knee-jerk reactions that seek to clean up, evict, and remove individuals experiencing houselessness, sweeping social problems out of public spaces to render them invisible and control behavior, rather than seeing our shared humanity. Enforcement-driven approaches are neither sustainable nor effective responses to deep-rooted societal issues, and they often exacerbate existing inequities and injustice.

This study reveals a hopeful path forward. Public park and recreation agencies are at a crossroads. Houselessness is a significant dilemma, and park and recreation professionals are striving to do their best in difficult circumstances. They must adapt and confront the issue of houselessness head-on. I urge the hardworking public park and recreation professionals to lobby their leadership and advocate with the energy they have left for support, training, knowledge, and resources. Many public park and recreation professionals have the autonomy to direct their own activities; they can steer their own ship in partnership with others to break through inertia and navigate barriers to change.

Embracing place-based care offers a positive solution. The potential for significant transformation is vast if the field of public park and recreation commits its considerable energy and power to understanding different models of working in response to houselessness. This study concludes that it is entirely possible to improve the lives of people experiencing houselessness while also stewarding our public parks and recreation amenities for everyone, regardless of their life circumstances, to enjoy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Definition of Public Space Management

Carmona (2008) provides a useful, but broad, definition of public space management:

“The set of processes and practices that attempt to ensure that public space can fulfill all its legitimate roles, whilst managing the interaction between, and impacts of, those multiple functions in a way that is acceptable to its users” (p. 203).

Carmona subdivides public space management into four inter-linked processes:

- The deployment of maintenance regimes to ensure spaces are fit for use.
- The regulation (formally or informally) of user behavior and conflict in spaces.
- Capital and maintenance investment in spaces and their services.
- Coordination of the interventions that span maintenance, resourcing, and regulation of spaces (Carmona, 2008).

Appendix B: Care for the Non-Human World

Although this PhD study focuses on care for the human world, care practices aimed at the non-human world, for example, environmental care or landscape stewardship, are also important. The literature review identified several studies that focus on care for the non-human world.

Low and Iveson (2016) consider the value of “care and repair” in creating more socially just places. They note: “An ethic of caring in public space would also include ‘repair’—the often-overlooked acts of maintenance and upkeep which keep the city and its residents going” (p. 20). Care acts can include picking up trash, gardening, or planting flowers. Mattern (2018) makes a similar association, albeit without linking to an ethic of care or theories of social justice. She argues that everyday maintenance should be made more visible and is taking on a new importance as a theoretical framework and political cause. In 2018, a “Festival of Maintenance” held in London celebrated those tending and caring for our world (Festival of Maintenance, 2020). No further development of this work, focusing specifically on the management of public parks, was found by the literature review for this study.¹⁸⁷

Joan Nassauer’s work on “cues to care” includes a consideration of care for places. Nassauer does not link her thinking to an ethic of care, instead focusing on landscape care, noting that landscapes that are neat or ordered might not be ecologically healthy (Nassauer, 1995). North American cultural preferences for neatness results in mess feeling uncomfortable, a sign of disorder. Those who keep a tidy front yard are presumed to care and are invested in the future of their community - termed the “halo effect” by Nassauer (Nassauer, 2011). Cues to care,

¹⁸⁷ Email contact was made with Shannon Mattern (29th November 2011) who was also unaware of research focusing specifically on park maintenance and care.

such as explanatory signage or evidence of human management like fences or mown turf, assist people in understanding the context of what they might interpret as disorder or signs of neglect, is in fact intentional care (Nassauer, 1995).

Cues to care in the context of urban public parks could potentially help park managers in thinking through how they transparently communicate unusual or temporarily messy park uses to park visitors and explain the active ways they are working, as managers of these spaces, to provide support or services. Anecdotally, it remains unusual in many park spaces to see such explanatory signage.

Appendix C: Interview instruments

Interview Instrument: Park and Recreation Professionals

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I'd like to start with some questions about your role and the work of your organization.

1. Could you describe your role and provide a brief description of your responsibilities?
 - a. How long have you worked in this role?
2. Starting with good park management. In your view, what does good quality service provision in park and recreation management look like?
 - Is this something that can be described as universal? Or do you think specific, local, contextual, factors play into "good" park management?
 - Can you give me some examples of what good park management or service provision looks like?
 - Has your opinion on good service provision changed over time? If yes - what factors have influenced this change in opinion?
3. Moving to houselessness. In what ways does your organization respond to individuals experiencing houselessness that are using parks for their daily needs, including shelter?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
 - b. Are there challenges to this work? If so, what are they? Can you provide examples of challenges?
 - c. Do you work with other organizations to respond to issues of houselessness? If so, who do you work with? [Prompt to ask about social care/service organizations].
4. What is your opinion of the work you have just described?
 - a. In your experience, what impact does it have on people's needs?
 - b. Is there anything you'd like to do differently? If yes, in what way? Would anything need to change to make this happen? If yes, what?
 - c. Is there anything new you'd like your organization to provide? If yes, what would this be?
 - d. Are there any other organizations you would like to work with in this area?

5. Can you estimate how much time you spend on an average week either responding directly, or thinking about how to respond, to issues related to houselessness?
 - a. How does this compare to 10 years ago? 5 years ago? [Tweak according to the interviewee's length of time in organization].

Values of care in relation to urban park management or practice

I am interested in how the idea of care might relate to the management of parks and the delivery of park and recreation services.

6. How do you think care is demonstrated in parks management policies and practices?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
 - b. What other ways might care get expressed in park management?
7. In what ways, if any, does the notion of “care” relate to your typical day-to-day work?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
 - b. To what extent do you think the concept of care relates to your work?
 - c. If interviewee indicates that care does not apply – why does care not apply to your day-to-day work?
8. Do you think care is present in the policies, services and practices of your organization when it comes to individuals experiencing houselessness who spend their time in parks? [provide e.g.s of caring practice if this is difficult to answer, i.e., leaving people to sleep].
 - a. If not, why do you think this?
 - b. If yes, can you provide examples?
 - c. In relation to the examples you have provided, are there challenges involved in manifesting care?
 - d. What is your opinion of this work?
 - e. In your experience, what impact does this work have on people's needs?
 - f. Is there anything you'd like to do differently? If yes, in what way? Would anything need to change to make this happen? If yes, what?
9. As far as you understand it, what is your organization's position on the issue of people experiencing houselessness using park spaces for their daily needs, including shelter?
10. What are your personal feelings about people experiencing houselessness using park spaces to help meet their daily needs? [Remind interviewee that their anonymity will be protected].

- a. What are your feelings about people experiencing houselessness using park spaces to sleep?

Examples of innovation or good practice

These next few questions are about the work of other park and open space agencies and how other organizations might manifest a consideration of care in their park management policies and practices.

- 11. Are you aware of any other park and open space agencies that are working to consider care in relation to their services, practices and policies?
 - a. If yes, can you provide specific examples? [Prompt for work relating to houselessness].
 - b. In what way is care being embodied?
- 12. Are there any other organizations that have not been mentioned yet that are working to provide care for houseless individuals using parks?
 - a. If yes, can you provide examples?

Future urban park management

This last set of questions are looking to the future of urban park management.

- 13. In your view, in what ways can care be suitably applied to parks management policy and practices?
 - a. Would this entail work with other organizations? If yes, who?
 - b. What do you think are the possible challenges or barriers to applying a notion of care to parks management?
 - c. What do you think are the possible opportunities that arise from applying a notion of care to parks management?
- 14. In your view, how can care be suitably applied by your organization in relation to houseless individuals using parks for their daily needs and shelter?
- 15. Given the increase of houselessness in many urban areas, what do you think is an appropriate role for public park and recreation agencies going forward?
- 16. Is there anything else you'd like to say that we haven't covered here today?
- 17. Who else do you recommend I talk to?
 - a. Why? How should I get in touch?

Interview Instrument: Individuals Experiencing Houselessness

Experience of using parks for shelter

1. Have you ever used a public park as a place to stay? (If yes, ask questions below. If no, move to question 9)
 - Locations, names of park if comfortable, if not ask for general area of city
 - Why did you choose the location(s)?
 - How long did you stay there?
 - How did you get comfortable/make shelter in the space?
 - How do you use the space?
2. What in the park is most useful for you? [Prompt for example of park amenities/services].
 - a. Why are these things useful?
3. Did you meet park staff whilst you were staying there? If yes, ask questions below. If no, move to question 4).
 - a. Could you tell me about your experiences with them?
 - b. How do they make you feel?
 - c. Do you speak to them?
 - d. Do they seem to care? [really important]
4. Have park staff ever been hostile or behaved poorly towards you?
 - a. If yes, can you tell me about this? How did it make you feel?
5. Do you encounter the police in the parks you use?
6. Have the police ever been hostile or behaved poorly towards you in the park?
 - a. If yes, can you tell me about this? How did it make you feel?
7. I am interested in care in public parks - have people acted towards you in caring ways when you are using a park?
 - a. If yes in what ways?
 - b. Who was this from? [probe for general population, park staff, police, social services].
 - c. How did it make you feel?

- d. Did it help you? If yes, in what way? If not, why not?
- 8. Do you know about the policy of sweeping/encampment removals in Seattle? If yes, what do you think of this?

Spending time in parks

- 9. Thinking about your day-to-day life, are there any parks you regularly spend time in? If yes, which ones? What do you like about these parks?
- 10. Why do you spend time in these parks?
 - a. How do you use the space? [prompt for eating/cooking/meeting friends].
 - b. Do you use parks to rest or sleep? If not, why not? If yes, when do you rest or sleep in parks? During the day? Overnight? Do you stay for more than one night?
 - c. What do you like about these parks?
 - d. If use at night: can you estimate how often you spend time in parks at night?
- 11. Do you feel comfortable spending time in parks?
 - a. If yes, why? If no, why?
- 12. Do you ever feel uncomfortable spending time in parks?
 - a. If no, why? If yes: what happened to make you feel uncomfortable? [Prompt for examples].
 - b. Have you ever been bothered or pestered by anyone in parks?
- 13. Do you see park staff in the parks you use?
 - a. If yes, could you tell me about your experiences with them?
 - b. How do they make you feel?
 - c. Do you speak to them?
 - d. Do they seem to care? [really important]
- 14. Do you encounter the police in the parks you use?
 - a. If yes, could you tell me about your experiences with them? How do they make you feel?

What parks might do differently

- 15. Are there changes you'd like to see in parks?
 - a. If yes, what would you like to see? Anything new? If no, why not?

16. How could park organizations better help those that are houseless?
- a. What would be most useful for you?
 - b. What would demonstrate care to you?
17. Do you think this is an appropriate role for park organizations?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to say that we haven't covered here today?
- a. Who else do you recommend I talk to? Why? How should I get in touch?

Appendix D: Research Participants by Group

Five groups of people were interviewed for this research:

- 1. Park and recreation professionals:** Such as park managers and other recreation, green or open space professionals engaged in the day-to-day management and delivery of services. Job roles and responsibilities included: park planning and development, community center managers, park program managers, park support and administration, park maintenance and park operations.
- 2. “Other” professionals:** Professionals that work in some capacity in relation to people experiencing houselessness using public spaces, including social work professionals, outreach workers, police officials, community safety officers, and relevant nonprofit representatives.
- 3. Individuals experiencing houselessness:** Individuals who are using, or have used, public parks for shelter. The study interviewed people experiencing chronic houselessness defined as someone who has been living in a place “not meant for human habitation” for at least 12 months, who may also be struggling with health conditions, mental illness and/or issues related to addiction (HUD, 2024b).
- 4. Business Improvement District workers:** Research participants employed by DowntownDC (Washington, D.C.), the Atlanta Downtown Improvement Districts, and the Seattle Downtown Association.
- 5. Council member:** Elected official, Atlanta City Council.

Participation Extent

The interviews with professionals generally lasted around one hour, while those with individuals experiencing houselessness were approximately 20 minutes. Most participants were asked the questions using the interview instruments in Appendix C. In Seattle six park professionals participated in a shorter interview which consisted of some questions drawn from the interview instrument and other broader questions designed to capture the specific context in which they work. For instance, the Seattle Conservation Corps interviewees were also asked questions about the Corps, and the Concierge participants participated in a shorter interview while they worked.

Appendix E: Description of the Four Seminars or Conferences

Presentation at the Park Pride Annual Conference, Atlanta (GA), March 2024

One-hour session consisting of a three-person panel of myself and the lead interviewees from Atlanta and Washington, D.C., Nakasha Shoyinka (Director of Supportive Services, Atlanta Downtown Improvement District), and Cecily Mendie (Franklin Park Manager, DowntownDC). I began our presentation with an introduction on the context of increasing houselessness in the United States and introduced the concept of park-based care and how it might offer a way forward for park and recreation service delivery. Nakasha Shoyinka and Cecily Mendie presented their respective work, and the session concluded with around fifteen minutes dedicated to questions and discussion.

City Park Alliance Peer Conversations (two online events), September 2024

Two one-hour seminars at which Nakasha Shoyinka and I presented. I introduced the national context relating to houselessness and the potential for park-based care to offer practical solutions for park practitioners. I also highlighted the example of care-based programming in Freeway Park, Seattle, to illustrate the potential of park-based care. Nakasha Shoyinka outlined the outreach efforts in Woodruff Park and the Atlanta downtown area before a general discussion, facilitated by Diana Colangelo, Assistant Director of Programs, City Park Alliance. Due to high demand the same event was held twice.

**Presentation at the National Recreation and Park Association Annual Conference, Orlando
(FL) September 2025**

The presentation consisted of a one-hour “education session” presented by myself, Nakasha, and Cecily. I opened the session by providing context on the growth of houselessness in the United States and the gaps in evidence regarding responses by park agencies to unhoused populations. I facilitated a session in which attendees answered questions on their local context and their agencies responses to houselessness before I presented the “ingredients of place-based care.” Nakasha and Cecily each presented their approaches.

Appendix F: Consent Form for Interviews

CONSENT FORM

Public Parks, Houselessness and Care

Helen Beck, PhD study, University of Washington

Email: Hbeck2@uw.edu Phone number: 425 428 9170

I am asking if you would be willing to participate in an interview lasting around one hour. This form gives you information to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Participation is voluntary. Please read this carefully. You may ask any questions about the study before deciding whether or not you want to become involved.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS STUDY

The research is a PhD study exploring the management and delivery of public park and recreation services, with particular attention on urban areas with high houseless populations. Interviews are being conducted to gather the perspectives of park managers and other green space or public professionals, and to understand the real-life experience of individuals using city parks for shelter.

The study will produce case studies exploring the role of park agencies in the context of increasing unsheltered houselessness. The case studies will aim to develop a better understanding of the challenges faced by modern urban public park agencies and their potential to be spaces of care for individuals experiencing houselessness.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the study is to contribute to the development of evidence on the changing roles and responsibilities of urban public park and recreation agencies.

REQUEST FOR INTERVIEW

I would like you to consent to be interviewed by me. The interview would take around one hour. This would take place at a location of your choice. You do not need to answer every question, and we can end the interview at any time.

REQUEST TO RECORD

I would like to audio record the interviews for accuracy of data collection. Recording ensures people's viewpoints and own words are accurately portrayed. If you do not consent to be recorded an interview can still take place.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION

If you would like your contribution to the study to be anonymous, please let me know.

Your privacy will be protected. All data will be stored securely, and I am the only person who will have access to it. After the interview, this file would be saved in a password-protected file in a secure location before being transcribed. The transcription will be saved in a password-protected document, and the original audio will be deleted. I will be the only person who has access to the recording and transcripts.

I will not disclose sensitive personal information. However, if you share information regarding a crime, or that you intend to harm yourself or others, I must report that to the appropriate authorities.

You may refuse to participate, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

CONSENT STATEMENTS

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact Helen Beck, email: hbeck2@uw.edu or phone: 425-428-9170. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed name

Signature and date

I consent to be audio recorded ☐

I do not consent to be audio recorded ☐

Appendix G: Nvivo Code Book

The 10 parent codes are in bold font, and the child codes are listed below each parent code.

Background information	Collection of codes that provide general background information on the case study cities.
1. Atlanta	The specifics of working in Atlanta, including a caring city culture and important role of private sector.
2. COVID	How did COVID impact on the city, parks, and houselessness? What's relevant here to the topic of care?
3. D.C.	Factors specific to the local environment of DC including the symbolic importance of the city and influence on organizations in the city.
4. Importance of housing	Interview content that explores the role of housing in the context of houselessness and how the provision of this can be a solution.
5. Internal debates	Interviewees recognize there is no easy answer and indicate they are thinking through the different angles.
6. Length of service	The length of time people have worked in their current role and/or how long they have worked for their organization.
7. Seattle	The many facets of Seattle as a city including its culture, specific parks with issues and contextual information that helps explain the area including the George Floyd protests and police union contract stipulations.
Care	Instances of care being used in a broad sense. Or people explaining the components of care and what it can mean, including care as inherent to them as an individual or the importance of care for community.
1. Barriers to providing care	Things that stand in the way of the provision of care, or factors that make providing care more complex.
a. Do not care	Specific observations that people "do not care."
2. Be a good human	Content in which people talk about caring as being inherent to them as humans, or the importance of treating others as they themselves would like to be treated.

3. Be left alone	Responses from mostly unhoused individuals that demonstrate care for them is being left alone.
4. Benefits of	Why providing care matters. For example, the perceived benefits of providing a shower or access to a restroom for people.
5. Building relationships	Care expressed in terms of building mutual relationships, connections, trust, or rapport, engaging with individuals and getting to know people or the right organizations.
6. Can't police our way out	Approaches that seek to be post-revanchist, compassionate, caring. Includes examples of interviewees feeling that calling the police is inappropriate.
7. Collaboration	Working with other organizations or individuals to either deliver care, achieve positive outcomes or build community.
8. Compassion or empathy	A running record of how people use the words compassion or empathy and the examples they provide. The importance of these qualities for place-based care. Examples of compassion or empathy being used in a contradictory way.
9. Complexities in caring	The complexities, balancing acts, or intellectual assessments involved in the act of providing care.
10. Dignity and respect	The importance of treating people with respect and dignity, as autonomous people with the right to choose, and work to ensure people's wants and needs are heard.
11. Eyes and ears	Instances when people talk about the importance of keeping watch or taking note of what is happening in the space/amenity.
12. Food	The issues and complexities involved in providing food to people.
13. Going above beyond	People or the organization stepping up and trying to provide care/help in an emergency. Or instances of individuals working beyond the scope of their job role and responsibilities or having the vision to work very differently.
14. Humanizing the houseless	Perceptions or observations that touch on the human face of houselessness, that recognize there is a person first and the houseless status second, and that recognize the reality of living unhoused.

15. Landscape stewardship	Care expressed as looking after the land, plants, animals, picking up trash.
16. Responsibility	Interviewees mention that they, or the organization they work for, have a responsibility to care or take action.
17. Simple services	Aspirations for parks and recreation that touch on the basics of park and recreation provision, for example making sure restrooms are clean and open for all users to access.
18. Situated	Care/outreach that is conducted in the environment the specific person/people is using, place-based care.
19. Sleep	The importance of enabling people to sleep, or the damaging effects of stopping people from sleeping.
20. Uncare	Something that is labelled as care but is not. Or instances that either denote a deliberate lack of care with damaging impacts or unintended harm due to a lack of knowledge.
21. Welcome	The act of providing people with a deliberate welcome to a space or recreation amenity or the value of creating spaces or amenities that invite people in.
22. Wheelhouse	People's perspectives on whether serving people experiencing houselessness is, or should be, part of a park and recreation agency's responsibilities or as part of their job.
Counternarrative	Interviewee highlights they don't agree with something that has been stated or thought by others.
Failures including policy	The policies or procedures that people perceive as not working or are unhelpful, obstructive, or don't make sense to them. Distinct from “barriers to care” code because these are individual's perceptions of general or endemic failures but there is some overlap.
Houselessness	General observations or contextual information pertinent to the topic of houselessness.
1. Community center shelters	Examples and content in relation to community centers being used as shelter in emergencies.

2. Enabling	Concerns or comments about the risk of supporting/ “enabling” people to live unhoused or attracting people to spaces if support services are offered e.g., food, seating, sharps containers etc.
3. Encampment removal	Content pertinent to the process of conducting an encampment removal on park property, including sweeps, and the rationale for involving park staff.
4. Othering	When people experiencing houselessness are dehumanized or there is a noticeable difference in the way people treat the unhoused.
5. So called	Interviewees express doubt that a person is technically houseless.
6. Unsafe or vulnerable	Examples of unhoused interviewees feeling unsafe/vulnerable using parks. This includes vulnerabilities from living unhoused in a park and examples of threatening behaviors by others.
7. Whack-a-mole and futility	Content pertinent to the futility of conducting sweeps or trying to “clean up” houselessness, Includes unhoused folks explaining the impact of sweeps on their lives.
8. Why the park	The reasons why people experiencing houselessness use parks, the services, amenities or features that are helpful
Juxtaposition	Statements or content which stand out because they're saying two different, opposing things at once.
New ways of working	Ideas of what could be done differently, or where there seems to be the potential to do better or try new things, or what is needed to make policy or responses better.
1. Design	Different ways of designing and building more resilient park infrastructure and the specific design elements that could be of benefit. Or examples provided by interviewees regarding design and its role in relation to parks and the lives of the houseless.
2. Parks and rec	Suggestions of the amenities or services park and recreation agencies in specific could provide for those experiencing houselessness.
3. Positive examples	Examples provided by interviewees that are felt to be positive or doing something new or worth replicating. Includes description of the case studies and examples given by interviewees in Seattle.

Rights	Content in which interviewees express opinions on, or mention, the personal rights of a person, including the right to choose to accept help, or the rights of individuals to use spaces.
Role and responsibilities	How is the person describing what they do professionally? Includes their breadth of responsibilities.
1. Change	How people's jobs or ways of working have changed over time or are currently changing. Or the change they are experiencing in the wider context.
2. Frontline	The ways in which park and recreation staff are described as being the first to respond or are prominent in dealing with social issues or stressful situations. Also, content that uses the language of war to describe their work or current context.
3. Judgment calls	Examples of people making decisions based on what they assess as best or appropriate rather than having anything codified or a more structured policy. Or people mentioning a context in which judgment calls must be made.
4. Morale	Negative personal feelings about the day-to-day job, including decisions made by management, and its impacts that include stress, frustration and burnout. Examples of people feeling despairing or distressed by the job.
5. Not my job	Instances where people note they are working outside their realm of skills, expertise or training. Or examples where people say they do not want to deal with the impacts of houselessness or interact with vulnerable people.
6. Park Concierges	The role of the Seattle Concierges in relation to houselessness.
a. Dangerous crazy job	The issues and challenges Concierges face in their day-to-day job, how the role can be hard, crazy, dangerous and unsafe.
7. Public servants	Content in which interviewees note they are publicly funded and/or serve local communities.
8. Safety	Content pertinent to safety/examples of unsafe factors for individuals or communities, including perceptions of safety, including those that don't necessarily correlate with reality.

a. Community Support Officers	Role of CSOs and how they work or provide support to parks and recreation agencies.
9. Skills and knowledge	The skills or knowledge individuals feel they lack. Or the expertise lacking more widely within the organization.
What is good service	Perceptions of what constitutes good park or recreation management, what is it that people strive for? How people know they're doing a good job.
1. Balancing acts	The balancing acts involved in managing competing demands for the same space or amenity. Examples of trade-offs involved in keeping a space or facility open to all.
2. Control of use or access	Content from interviewees that is opposite to the 'open to all' coding category. Instances and examples where the use or access of certain groups to spaces and amenities is controlled or limited. Includes thoughts on the “proper” functions of parks/spaces.
3. Multifaceted	In what ways are public parks or recreation services unique? How is the parks and rec department different to other city agencies? How a particular role or job is multifaceted.
4. Nuances of management	The complex aspects of providing a well-managed space, the dilemmas in trying to do so, and the concurrent issues in play.
5. Open to all	Content expressing the fact that park and recreation amenities are open to all, regardless of housing status.

Appendix H: Shelter in Place

A few interviewees mentioned the COVID shelter in place guidance and its impact, particularly on standards of oversight or enforcement in their park and recreation spaces. During the early stages of the pandemic, following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), houseless individuals living outside in public spaces in cities such as Seattle were allowed to shelter in place (Brownstone & Beekman, 2020). A Park Support Staff member explained that she understood this guidance was aimed at stopping the spread of COVID but believed it was a bad decision describing it: “totally irrational from an infrastructure perspective,” and as creating: “almost unreparable damage” that Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) is still dealing with today.

This damage includes negative impacts to park landscapes and amenities because they were used as shelter, and to relationships with longstanding community and voluntary partners who had engaged with SPR to improve spaces. She explained:

If you were a forest steward and you had, you know, spent the last 20..30 years at Licton Springs renovating the forest and you helped get that comfort station built and had your storage there for your tools, and then the city just let it all get destroyed...(Park Support, Parks Department).

The Park Support staff member did not understand why shelter in place enabled people to stay in the places they were already using and felt that SPR could have been more strategic by creating zones for camping. She suggested that these zones could have explicitly considered the needs of the unhoused individuals utilizing park spaces while also considering the park infrastructure and its ongoing maintenance requirements. Furthermore, she was frustrated by a lack of oversight or stewardship within park spaces during the pandemic. For example:

You could camp on the shoreline of Green Lake and shit in the lake. And no, nobody can stop it. But you couldn't say to that person, hey, Woodland Park across the street is open for shelter, but not the shoreline of Green Lake (Park Support, Parks Department).

During the pandemic she felt:

Everything got destroyed. And every kind of rule or law or parks code or whatever, was just unenforceable. And then, you know, the poor maintenance person, they could be working around the shoreline weed eating or removing whatever they're doing their job. And all the public would see is you're letting this homeless person shit in the lake like right next to you (Park Support, Parks Department).

She was distressed by the damage to Seattle's parks:

How many bathrooms did we lose to fire during COVID that are still torched, and not replaced and burnt down, like the infrastructure and cost that and as a crew chief, I could report every day, you know, campers are lighting fires at the entrance of Licton Springs. And not one person could do anything about it until it burnt to the ground, you know? (Park Support, Parks Department).

An individual with a role in planning and development with responsibility for park security also expressed frustration at the lack of enforcement during the pandemic, he stated: "no-one was coming into work. There was a lot more vandalism, I was here with a skeleton crew." He also believed the city is yet to fully recover, especially Seattle's downtown. Another parks planning and development staff member echoed this sentiment; he felt shelter in place led to: "people got comfortable living (in parks). The enforcement wasn't near where it used to be."

Appendix I: Partnership for Zero

Partnership for Zero was an ambitious, \$10 million outreach project that aimed to reduce houselessness in Seattle's downtown and Chinatown-International District areas to thirty or fewer people (Sun, 2022). Focused on individuals experiencing chronic, unsheltered houselessness, Partnership for Zero launched in February 2022, started outreach in fall 2022, and ended a year later, September 2023, having housed 230 people (KCRHA, 2023d).

Led by King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA), in partnership with the City of Seattle and other private and philanthropic organizations, Partnership for Zero aimed to develop a "by name list" of individuals using outreach workers to develop trust, deliver support, and access services (KCRHA, 2023a). However, the program closed amid allegations it had failed to show results and ran out money (Kim, 2024)

The collapse of Partnership for Zero had a negative impact on other organizations working in the downtown area. The Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) closed its team of outreach workers (around 8-10 workers) once the pilot program started. A DSA interviewee explained that the idea behind Partnership for Zero was there would be a single outreach pathway for everyone experiencing houselessness in the downtown, commenting: "it was very noble idea, and in a lot of ways, I think it was, especially for this area, the right idea. It just wasn't the right execution basically." The DSA wound down their outreach operations because: "it made sense for us to step back from that. And hand that work over to another agency that's supposed to be consolidating that."

Prior to their disbandment, the DSA's outreach team would regularly station themselves in Westlake Park. They found this to be an effective way to engage with individuals experiencing houselessness:

What that allowed is what our ambassadors could do is if our Ambassadors woke somebody up could say hey our outreach team right now is at Westlake Park. Can we walk you over to Westlake Park? And then you can meet with our folks over there? And sometimes we know Oh you're being case managed by somebody on that team. Hey, they're in the park right now, when was the last time you talked to them? I'll walk you over (Manager, DSA).

The DSA asked Partnership for Zero to continue this model of working using the park, but it only happened a few times before the initiative ended. They were frustrated at this slow pace of work: "They dragged their feet, getting to the table, it took a whole lot of cajoling from a bunch of us. They got to the table and then a month later, the whole thing folded." Since Partnership for Zero ended: "there functionally is no observed team on the ground that looks like they have a contract for downtown."

Another interviewee from the outreach team at REACH also shared their frustrations, noting:

They also poached everybody's top people, because they decided to start up their own direct service group, to provide outreach in downtown to create a massive binding list to house people, but with no plan at the 13th month, every meeting was like what's going to happen at the 13th month? So they put people in housing with no plan after a year, and then the partnership failed (Outreach Manager, REACH).

Appendix J: SPR Emergency Pandemic Shelters

It is noteworthy how quickly SPR adapted their services in Spring 2020 in response to the COVID pandemic, modifying their programs in response to community needs, and taking a direct role in providing shelter by utilizing their park and recreation amenities to assist those experiencing houselessness. A Community Center Manager summarized the pandemic experience: “those were wild years, you know, they were trying to run shelters with no training and doing social distancing, and weather events. And you know it was nuts!” A Park Program Manager commented on the pace of change: “the way that things are purveyed by a park system had to change because there wasn’t any time to drag your feet.” He explained that, under normal circumstances, they would pilot new services: “but with COVID it was like, no you got to do it! Like go go go go!” Another Park Program Manager described their work as grounded in good intentions, but at first it was: “a lot of reactive versus proactive.”

Using the center facilities as emergency shelters during the pandemic was stressful, with some interviewees expressing a willingness to help but simultaneously feeling out of their depth or ill-prepared. An Operations Manager, responsible for the oversight of nine community centers, observed that while she felt ill-equipped, she wanted to assist because her role is to serve the public, she commented:

There have been times where we've done certain things like run cold weather shelters, where we're like, ‘Oh, my God, like, I'm not an expert in this.’ I don't, you know. But you do what you're asked to do and what the city needs and what the public needs (Operations Manager, Recreation Department).

Out of 18 interviewees, seven had firsthand experience working in these facilities: six community center staff and one Park Program Manager. One Community Center Manager described their center's role during the pandemic: "we provided homeless shelters; we provided childcare for first responders and emergency workers. And we provided classroom space for students who don't have internet access at home." He believed their work was crucial, stating: "these were really vital services that we were providing to our community. And my opinion was just like, hey, we've got to make this work."

While community centers had previously been used for weather-related shelter, the scale of the pandemic response was unprecedented. An individual who worked as a day shift manager for one site explained this way of working: "had never even been considered in our department. We did occasionally, we would do severe storm shelters, but that would be over you know a 24-hour period. This thing ran for six months." He added that, as a park professional, he never expected to take on such a role and noted that there was resistance from others within SPR:

You're asking people who joined the Parks Department to you know run a sports league, you're now telling that person to run a homeless shelter. There was a lot of pushback there, but it was again, nobody knew what they were doing during COVID, so it was toe the line or you know, find something else (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

An individual with a background in social services prior to joining SPR, described her reaction in 2020 upon hearing her center would be turned into a shelter: "I was pissed at how the city's reaction to becoming a shelter was that we could do it all. We didn't need people with experience to do this work; we could do it." She was also upset about the wage discrepancy between employees of houseless service agencies in Seattle and those working for SPR. SPR staff could claim overtime pay in addition to their higher basic hourly rate, yet she felt those

employees were: “not knowing what they’re doing, and having just come out of nonprofit work, it was really, really frustrating.”

Some interviewees noted that SPR had learned from providing shelter prior to 2020 during extreme weather conditions, and this previous experience informed the agency’s pandemic response. Partnerships with social service providers brought in people with the skills and experience to run over-night shelters. Park and recreation staff were primarily responsible for maintaining the facilities and coordinating with these providers to meet their needs for equipment or amenities. One Community Center Manager appreciated the partnership because it allowed her staff to step back: “I think that’s the best parts of the evolution were that the service providers were almost entirely responsible for all the intake, all the meals, all of the complaints by people overseeing the showers.”

Despite this division of labor, some park and recreation staff chose to interact with shelter users, fostering connections and building rapport. A park planning and development interviewee shared his experience: “I’m a social extrovert so of course I was down there hamming it up with the guys, like getting to know people. Because what else was I going to do? None of my other job duties were going on.” He found it difficult not to get involved and believed that other SPR recreation staff felt similarly: “we want to still provide good customer service, which is what a lot of the staff that were in those facilities at that time were customer service roles.” He pointed out the differences between serving families who were signing up for activities and individuals using the centers for shelter. He remarked this could be challenging

The customer service that you would give to a family who is signing up their kid for an activity versus someone who has been practically homeless for 30 years and has a

substance abuse addiction, it's gonna be a very different conversation (Planning and Development, Parks Department).

A Community Center Manager noted that the pandemic shifted her perspective on people experiencing homelessness. She formed connections with some individuals using the center and learned their stories:

I didn't look at somebody as just being dirty anymore. Oh, you live on the street. So, you are homeless. I didn't look at that anymore. I was like for me. It was more like it humanized them more for me (Community Center Manager, Recreation Department).

She was on leave when the shelters closed and she still wonders after the fate of some of the individuals she met: “some of them I was pretty invested in like, oh, I wonder how because they were trying really hard. Did they kick their meth habit? Did they kick this, or did they get jobs?”

The relationship between community center employees and the service providers running the shelters were sometimes tense. While the centers adapted to provide shelter during the pandemic, SPR staff also remained focused on their broader mission of serving the wider community. They continued to ensure the centers were maintained and kept in good shape. One Community Center Manager remarked it was hard: “not having any idea how long this pandemic would last, and you know, what the center would look like when the shelter was over.” There was also frustrations at one center when a service provider was found using a room designated for sports equipment storage, a Manager commented they would: “kind of take over one of our rooms that wasn't part of the shelter and it's like no, we still need to keep this facility secure.” One Community Center Manager particularly struggled in their partnership with the Salvation Army, noting a disconnect with their usual work culture: “they have an anti queer bias, and they

require a lot of religious compliance that complicates things. And most would argue is not good in our world [public parks and recreation].”

Appendix K: Experience of The Seattle Conservation Corps

One interviewee participated in the Seattle Conservation Corps (SCC) program. This is a Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) program that supports individuals experiencing houselessness by helping them develop skills, access training and employment opportunities, and find permanent housing. After the interviewee graduated, they worked as a SCC Supervisor and, at the point of our interview, now works for SPR in a support role for parks. They described the interview process for the SCC:

The interview process was like nothing I'd ever experienced. They didn't care about my experience. Were you homeless? Yes. I can't remember what the other question was. There was only like two or three questions but completely unrelated to work or work experience it was it was based around being homeless (Support Worker, Parks Department).

They described the level of support that was available:

They'll help you get a driver's license; they'll help you get your GED; they'll help you get housing; they'll help you with any counselling if you need trauma counselling. And or whatever type of counselling. They help you get a job when you leave the Corps you don't leave without a job (Support Worker, Parks Department).

In addition, the program teaches participants who might never have worked in a full-time job how to sustain employment: “they teach you to come in and be there every day and become reliable. Become a good employee.” As part of the program, they were assisted by the SCC to find housing and were able to move into clean and sober housing. The support provided by a SCC case worker was especially valuable:

I had a caseworker assigned to me and she was wonderful. I thought that she was really great. And she told me what I needed to hear. And I told her my plan. You know what I wanted? I wanted to get my own place. I wanted to find a permanent job. I wanted to continue with AA, I wanted some type of accountability because I didn't feel that I was responsible enough to make my own decisions at that point, that I needed that extra layer (Support Worker, Parks Department).

They described their progression through the program:

I was there for the full year. So I started out at just the work trainee, tier one. And then I went to specialist, that's their next level, which really isn't anything. There's no pay raise stuff, no nothing, it's just a title to show that you're responsible, you're doing what's right, you're being safe. You're showing up every day. But becoming a specialist is important because it opens up the door to become a lead. And those are coveted positions. There's only one lead per crew, sometimes two, depending on the size of the crew. But you cannot become a lead unless you're a specialist (Support Worker, Parks Department).

The interviewee thinks the SCC model works because it supports people to rebuild their lives while working.

Appendix L: Difficulty in Finding Outreach Support

Being unable to easily reach social support providers or outreach workers was a common challenge reported by many of the interviewees working in Seattle's public spaces. The difficulty in finding outreach support is indicative of broader problems in supportive service provision in the city. An Outreach Manager at REACH described the current systems for accessing support as "deeply elitist and complicated," hampering efforts to connect people to housing and the services they require and discriminating against those who need extra support to access help. Part of the problem is there are multiple ways to access support. This means it can be convoluted and confusing for those that are attempting to navigate these systems:

It's incredibly frustrating, especially for folks who are disabled who don't have the same capacity to be navigating these things, and so that then confuses service providers, because they don't know which way to go so then they give bad information and so it just keeps trickling down (Outreach Manager, REACH).

The Community Service Officers, Downtown Seattle Association (DSA), and other REACH interviewees were also frustrated. One Community Service Officer said:

You used to be able to email homelessness@seattle.gov and you would get connected to an actual outreach worker. Now if you email them, you literally get an automatic reply email that, it's a joke, it says call 211. And it's that's just not what the community is looking for (Community Service Officer, Seattle Police Department).

The DSA interviewees answered that their networks of contacts are constantly changing and evolving. They try to identify the people that are easiest to communicate with and proactively maintain these connections.

Appendix M: Seattle Parks and Recreation Programs Serving Different Social Groups

Table M.1: Examples provided by Interviewees of SPR Programs Serving Different Societal Groups

User Group	Example
Vietnamese senior citizens	Ran in partnership with the Vietnamese Senior Association, this program is based in Garfield Community Center and is free of charge to access. Running twice a week the program provides social and fitness activities and a meal. Once a week, participants are given a bag of groceries from a food bank. ¹⁸⁸
Young people, aged 18 and under	The Summer Food Service Program established in the late 1960s provides up to two free meals a day for young people from late June to the end of August each year. The program is run in partnership with The Seattle Human Services Department (HSD), Seattle Public Schools, and United Way of King County (UWKC). Meals are supplied in selected parks, playgrounds, community centers, and schools in Seattle. ¹⁸⁹
Low-income young people, aged between 6 and 19	The Summer of Safety Program offers free activities such as field trips, arts and crafts, and sports to tweens and teens from low-income neighborhoods. Based in eight community centers in 2024 this program connects with the Summer Food Service Program to also provide young people with access to meals. ¹⁹⁰
Individuals experiencing houselessness	The Seattle Conservation Corps is a SPR program that provides skills, training and employment for people experiencing houselessness. Since its inception in 1986, over 800 people have successfully completed the program. Assistance from the program also includes help to access permanent housing. ¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ <https://ethnomed.org/resource/vietnamese-senior-association/>

¹⁸⁹ www.seattle.gov/human-services/services-and-programs/youth-and-young-adults/summer-food-service-program

¹⁹⁰ <https://parkways.seattle.gov/2024/07/01/2024-summer-of-safety-free-activities-and-safe-places-for-youth/>

¹⁹¹ www.seattle.gov/parks/about-us/plans-and-reports/seattle-conservation-corps

Individuals experiencing houselessness	Emergency shelters in the Seattle and King County areas during periods of extreme weather, poor air quality, or public health crises are provided in sites that include selected SPR community centers (KCHRA, 2024c).
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Appendix N: How Can the Profession Address the Needs of Individuals Experiencing Houselessness?

Table N.1: How Can the Public Parks and Recreation Profession Better Address the Needs of Unhoused Populations?

Ideas from interviewees for new services or alternative approaches.¹⁹²

New Services	Working Differently
• Add designated areas to parks to host services such as food trucks, mobile physical and mental health provision (Park Support worker, Community Support Officer (CSO), Community Center Manager, Park Program Manager) • Provide attended park restrooms (CSOs) • Additional stewardship in parks, to include more park rangers (CSOs, We Heart Seattle, Park Program Manager) • Safe needle disposal in parks (CSOs, Park Program Manager) • Free “community feeds” at community centers (Community Center Manager) • Host safe parking for RVs in community center parking lots (Community Center Manager) • Add and maintain community bulletin boards to parks with lists of nearby resources and social support (Facing Homelessness interviewee) • Host community canned food pantries in parks (Facing Homelessness interviewee) • Host a benefit concert for the unhoused in parks (unhoused interviewee) • Host clothing cupboards or “free” tables in community centers (Community Center Manager) • Provide banks of public power outlets in parks (unhoused interviewee)	• Invest in more free shower programs including mobile facilities (Facing Homelessness interviewee, retired SPR interviewee) • Include a budget line at each shower site to purchase the most requested supplies such as hygiene items, socks, and underwear (Community Center Manager) • Increase custodial staff at shower sites (Community Center Manager) • Allow longer showers for individuals who are getting ready for job interviews (Community Center Manager) • Allow camping in certain parks, create and maintain safe camping zones and kitchen areas (Park Support worker) • Parks grounds staff to facilitate community clean ups in partnership with the unhoused community (Community Center Manager) • Partner with local businesses to use park spaces for skills development and training for unhoused individuals (unhoused interviewee) • Relax some requirements for criminal background checks to make it easier to hire unhoused individuals (Community Center Manager, unhoused interviewee) • SPR to use its power as a large organization to facilitate better partnership working with other city organizations that focus on the public realm (Seattle Downtown Association interviewee)

¹⁹² All Seattle interviewees were asked this question.

• Provide connections to wraparound services at every shower site (Community Center Manager) • Park staff to be trained in first aid to better offer help to people using parks (unhoused interviewee) • Invest in fireproof picnic shelters and restrooms (Park Support worker, Park Planning and Development worker) • Host tiny home villages in park spaces (CSOs) • Partner with providers of tiny homes to provide classes or programs for residents (CSOs).	• Review community center facility design to understand equity considerations and better incorporate a range of user groups (Community Center Manager).
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Appendix O: Different Ways of Working to Respond to Houselessness

Figure O.1: Suggestions from Interviewees for Tackling Houselessness or Supporting Individuals Experiencing Houselessness (Beyond Parks and Recreation Profession)

Suggestions
• Enforce Martin versus City of Boise Supreme Court decision to get people out of camps and give them somewhere else to go (We Heart Seattle interviewee). • Give financial subsidies to businesses to encourage them to provide restroom access to the public (We Heart Seattle interviewee). • Challenge the bureaucracy and paperwork surrounding different ways of working regarding houselessness e.g., required permits or legal liabilities (Outreach worker). • Establish a compulsory national program to tackle houselessness that places people into vacant office buildings and provides services to assist individuals in finding housing or back into employment as well as mandatory rehabilitation from drug addiction (Park Planning and Development worker). • The City of Seattle to facilitate the provision of jobs and accommodation for people experiencing houselessness. This could be funded by residents, businesses, and churches (unhoused interviewee). • Provide safe injection sites (Park Program Manager). • Establish a mental health and social service van to attend to people in need throughout the city (Park Program Manager). • Keep centers that provide social services open twenty-four hours a day. Bring in the community to help, for example by cooking meals (unhoused interviewee). • Include lessons on surviving outside in schools, including how to pitch a tent correctly so it is stable on all terrains (unhoused interviewee). • Increase partnership working between all the organizations working in the city (Program Managers, Not-for-profit organizations - two individuals). • Move people out of encampments by using concentrated models of outreach that take place over several weeks to identify their needs and match them to the right accommodation (Outreach Manager). • Design public restrooms that are accessible by unique codes. If an individual leaves the facility in a poor state revoke their access (Outreach worker). • Establish dedicated crisis teams that attend to emergencies relating to people experiencing houselessness and refer individuals to services (Community Center Manager).

Appendix P: Interviewees with Lived Experience of Houselessness

Table P.1: Interviewees with Lived Experience of Houselessness by Pseudonym

Pseudonym	Area
Cole	Seattle
Dan	Seattle
Dylan	Seattle
Ed	Seattle
George	Seattle
Jonnie	Seattle
Joseph	Seattle
Relik	Seattle
Sonja	Seattle
Sophia	Seattle
Tammy	Seattle
Ben	Washington, D.C.

Appendix Q: The Cozy Corner Program, Freeway Park, Seattle (WA)

The History and Design of Freeway Park

Opened in 1976, Freeway Park was the first park in the world constructed over a freeway (Freeway Park Association, 2025). At that time, Seattle, like many other American cities, was undergoing significant change as it moved away from an era of industrialization and began to question the legacy of an extensive post-war program of freeway construction (Ochsner, 2014). Funded by the city's Forward Thrust bond program, the creation of Freeway Park was driven by a growing desire for high-quality public spaces in parts of the city blighted by the impacts of industry and rapid urbanization (Way, 2015). By reclaiming airspace above the I-5 to create this new public space in central Seattle, Freeway Park is an important example of innovation in urban infrastructure and remains a key landmark for the city (Way, 2015).

Figure Q.1: Aerial Photograph, Freeway Park Around Time of Opening 1976 (photo undated)



Source: CBE Visual Resources Collection, University of Washington

Designed by Lawrence Halprin and Angela Danadjieva, Freeway Park spans 5.2 acres and stretches across a series of three connected plazas. Halprin referred to the park as “a garden born from the freeway.” At its center is a modernist concrete canyon waterfall, surrounded by concrete geometric block planters (Tate, 2001). The park was conceived to offer respite from the loud highway. The brutalist Canyon in the Central Plaza is designed to pump 28,000 gallons of water per minute over concrete overhangs, with the sound of this water intended to drown out the freeway noise below (Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2006).

Figure Q. 2: Freeway Park Geometric Blocks, 1978



Source: CBE Visual Resources Collection

Some elements of the park’s design can result in visitors feeling vulnerable. Walkways within the Canyon are narrow and have poor lines of sight and the waterfall, the focal point of the park, works intermittently. Surveys of park users highlight concerns about the park being dark, difficulties with wayfinding within the space, and a reluctance to walk through the park at night due to poor lighting and some visible houselessness (Freeway Park Association, 2017).

The Freeway Park Association

The FPA was established in the 1990s due to local concerns that Freeway Park had become unsafe and was neglected and in need of investment. Residents living in Horizon House, a residential community for older adults located near the park's upper east lawn, founded the organization and invited other local neighborhood groups to become involved.

The newly formed organization approached Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) with the idea that the community could help highlight safety issues within the park and raise funds for capital renovations and improvements. Riisa, FPA Executive Director, explained:

Their lens was really safety and security at the time I mean, the person who started it was the security director (of Horizon House). So that was kind of their focus. We've morphed our mission and vision quite a lot since then (Riisa Conklin, FPA Executive Director).

In 2016 the FPA became an Urban Parks Partner with SPR and now receives funding from the Metropolitan Improvement District tax of approximately \$50k a year. Their activation efforts help bring different user groups together to enjoy the space, Riisa explained: “we offer a lot of volunteer opportunities to create stewardship of the park” with their events bringing “together of these different communities in and around the park in ways that you didn't see on a day-to-day basis.” This includes those:

Who were homeless, who were you know, had families who lived in the women's shelter down the street who, you know, mixing with, you know, the retired folks up the hill, people would come bring their families from other parts of the city because Freeway Park is such a big name in other parts of the city. So, all of these people coming together at special events (Riisa Conklin, FPA Executive Director).

Cozy Corner Images

Figure Q.3: Fire pits, January 2025



Source: Helen Beck

Figure Q.4: Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator and the Book Cart, January 2024



Source: Helen Beck

Figure Q.5: Call for Winter Donations, January 2023



Source: Freeway Park Instagram, January 11, 2023

Field Observations During FPA Programming

I volunteered in Freeway Park to gain insight into the work of the FPA and understand how values of care or compassion inform their programming. I attended seven sessions, held from noon to 2pm, during a variety of weather conditions: four Cozy Corner sessions (January 2024, twice in March 2024, and Jan 2025) and three spring/summer sessions which follow a similar format to Cozy Corner but do not include fire pits (May 2024, June 2024, and September 2024).¹⁹³

¹⁹³ January 2024 (mild and sunny, approximately 50 degrees), March 12th, 2024 (cool, scattered showers and later sunshine, 46 degrees), March 19th, 2024 (warm and sunny, 64 degrees), May 2024 (warm and sunny, 70 degrees), June 2024 (mild but felt cool due to wind and rain, 60

The sessions were enjoyable, attracting a diverse group of people who were friendly and happy to spend time in the park. The atmosphere was relaxed, calm and welcoming, with music filling the space, masking the noise of the freeway, and drawing people towards the book carts and picnic tables. The fire pits were operational during two sessions and the seats around them were well used, with attendees making use of the blankets provided to stay warm, with some dozing in front of the flames.¹⁹⁴ The lunches, drinks, and snacks were popular, with hot drinks running out more quickly during the colder sessions and lunches disappearing more rapidly during the spring and summer sessions.

A wide range of people enjoyed the snacks and refreshments, including residents and workers, but Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, took care to safeguard most lunches to give to those she understands to be houseless. Some regular attendees would return unwanted items from the lunch bags to the snack table for others to enjoy. I observed workers entering the park to sit at the tables close to the busker to eat lunch and enjoy the music. Residents walked their dogs through the area, sometimes stopping to browse the book carts or pick up a drink or snack. Many visitors greeted Gabi and others in the space.

Among the visitors were those that I assessed to be houseless; some carried bags, while others, occasionally agitated or in incomplete attire, approached the lunch table, frequently asking if it was okay to take something. Gabi welcomed those she did not know, explained the lunches were free, and invited people to stay and enjoy the music. The presence of unhoused individuals did not seem to bother other attendees; however, I noted that many of the unhoused

degrees), September (dry and pleasant, 64 degrees) and January (cold, 39 degrees but felt cooler due to wind chill).

¹⁹⁴ Fire pits are provided in the winter months only. Two out of the four sessions were either too windy or too mild for fire pit provision.

visitors tended to stay apart from the workers sitting at the tables, often choosing quieter spots to eat.

Each session was attended by between 15 and 25 people, and over the seven sessions, I began to recognize regular visitors, housed and unhoused. Some would borrow a book and eat lunch while listening to the music, while others warmed themselves up by the fire and dozed in a chair. At the end of each session, Gabi would pack up the book carts and snack tables first, leaving the chairs and fire pits for last. She prefers to do this so people can stay until the end, recounting a time when a visitor fell asleep in chair in the sun. She left him to sleep and returned at the end of the day to pack away the chair.

When attendees saw her start to pack up, they took this as a cue to leave. I rarely noticed any trash during the sessions; those who received the bagged lunches took care to clean up their wrappings. Gabi confirmed that she seldom needs to pick up litter following a session, observing that if you look after people, they often reciprocate. Sometimes, regulars helped Gabi move the chairs back to the storage sheds at the side of Seneca Plaza.

Table Q.1 provides examples of the various ways I observed people interacting with the program and receiving support. Throughout each session, individuals from all walks of life were able to eat, drink, socialize and relax, regardless of their level of income or housing status. The examples below illustrate how the FPA uses the park as a venue to deliver small but significant improvements in people's lives.

Table Q.1: Examples of Supportive Interactions within the Park

Description of Individual	Interaction	Type of Support
A white man, perhaps in his thirties, without a coat wearing broken and incomplete clothing. ¹⁹⁵	He took a lunch and approached the fire where someone was already sitting wrapped in a blanket. He also took a blanket to wrap himself in and began to eat and chat with the other person. He stayed for the whole session but left quickly when we began to pack up, taking the blanket to cover himself.	Food, warmth, social interaction
A white female in her thirties who said she is living houseless.	She rinsed her water flask with the water provided and filled it with hot coffee. She picked up a lunch and snacks and chatted with us for a while before moving away to eat elsewhere.	Food, drinks, social interaction
Young Black male, who said he is from Georgia	A regular visitor to the program who always borrows a book to read. He took a lunch and went to sit by the fountain. He moved to the city around 9 months prior and said he visits the park for companionship and to relax. He likes seeing people from all walks of life at the sessions and thinks the FPA is helping to build a feeling of community. He stayed for the session and at the end helped Gabi, FPA Park Operations Coordinator, pack away the chairs.	Food, entertainment, social interaction
Middle aged white male who lives or works nearby	This individual regularly visits the program to browse the book carts. He often buys books for his mother and joked that he needs to ration	Social interaction, entertainment

¹⁹⁵ The information in the table is based on my fieldwork observations. Gender and race are perceived and assumed. Attendees were not asked for their personal information and therefore the information in this table is not objectively collected.

	himself to just the one book. He asked Gabi about her recent vacation and seemed pleased to see her and spend time catching up.	
A white male in a state of agitation and distress	The male was seeking comfort and spoke about the cause of his agitation for a while with Gabi. He was shaky and had coffee, and a lunch. He asked to volunteer and completed a form to sign up for future sessions. He then moved over to the tables by the busker and spent some time shaving and applying make-up in the sun. He left the park before the session ended looking calmer.	Food, social interaction, entertainment, respite
An older, perhaps in his 60s, Black male living houseless and very familiar to Gabi who has a good rapport with him.	This regular visitor to the program had been waiting in the park to meet with the Salvation Army, but they didn't turn up. He said he was hopeful of being offered housing soon. He had a lunch and a hot drink and chatted with us all. Other people came to say hello to him. He stayed for the whole session, later turning his chair to sit in the sun and enjoy the busker's music.	Food, social interaction, entertainment, respite
A senior from Horizon Housing located close to the park	An older lady who was familiar with Gabi walked into the park close to the end of a session. She browsed the book carts and chose two books which she purchased using a free voucher provided to seniors by the FPA. She confessed she felt hungry but would not take a lunch, instead she made sure another visitor took it. She stayed to chat and recognized the male (above) and moved to a table to talk with him as he ate.	Social interaction, entertainment
A white man who appeared houseless	It was a very cold day; the man carried his bags over to the fire and wrapped himself in a blanket. He spent the time warming up by the fire, eating a lunch and drinking hot drinks. Occasionally he chatted with others that were sitting nearby.	Food, drinks, warmth, respite, social interaction

Appendix R: Supportive Outreach, Woodruff Park, Atlanta (GA)

The Outreach Dispatch Line

Any ADID staff member, such as the Ambassadors, or anyone based in the downtown area, including local businesses and Georgia State University, can raise a ticket for outreach assistance. Nakasha, Director of Supportive Services, explained:

We have a dispatch line where our ambassadors, our public safety officers, and our clean team can call in and create a ticket, which kind of gives us more information about the need of the person. Once that ticket is placed into our dispatch, then our outreach team goes out to where that location is usually within the park and offers them any type of services that they need (Nakasha Shoyinka, Director of Supportive Services, ADID Homeless Outreach).

The number of tickets varies each day, typically ranging from two to six, depending on the season. The team tends to receive more requests for help as the weather gets colder. The Case Managers described a typical response to a dispatch call, emphasizing the importance of getting to know an individual's situation and reassuring them they are there to help connect them to services:

Just saying 'hello,' not knowing what their barriers are, and what their outcomes would be. But you made light, you know once that process starts, and they feel your trust, that you going to be there and support them through their process (Case Manager, ADID Homeless Outreach).

A Case Manager added:

Even the smallest stuff can be considered a success, just the smallest given the volume of adversity. Identification, giving them a bus ticket to reunite with family members, or getting employment after not having years in employment because they didn't have a birth certificate or identification (Case Manager, ADID Homeless Outreach).

Since 2022, the Case Managers have used Client Track, the State of Georgia's Homeless Management Information System.¹⁹⁶ This system can be accessed by any organization working to deliver services to houseless populations. For instance, Michael Nolan, a Team Leader for Homeless Services at a not-for-profit in Atlanta, explained that if the information is entered correctly, everyone can view the services accessed, he stated:

If ADID has engaged with that person and provided services, then in a perfect world, those services are also recorded in that database. So that then I can see oh, okay, well, this, my client has also engaged with ADID and they're helping with, you know, getting their state identification Michael Nolan, a Team Leader for Homeless Services, Intown Cares).

¹⁹⁶ <https://dca.georgia.gov/affordable-housing/homelessness-assistance/homeless-management-information-system-hmis>

Woodruff Park Photos

Figure R.1: ATL Play Structure



Source: Helen Beck, October 2023

Figure R.2: Park Plaza and Woodruff Park Reading Room



Source: Helen Beck, October 2023

Figure R.3: Woodruff Park Restroom



Source: Helen Beck, October 2023

Figure R.4: Park Rules



Source: Helen Beck, October 2023

Appendix S: Caring Park Management, Franklin Park, Washington, D.C.

The Franklin Park Re-Design

Before its renovation, Franklin Park was a popular space for unhoused populations to spend their day. A key goal of the park's redesign was to include and engage all users of the space, including those experiencing houselessness (Land Collective, n.d.). For example, site renderings featured images of unhoused visitors, and the design intentionally omitted hostile architecture that would discourage sleeping in the space.

Rachel Hartman, the Executive Director of DowntownDC, explained the inclusion of unhoused visitors in site renderings: "it was intentionally, oh yes, we're not going to wipe them out of photographs or renderings of the spaces." DowntownDC has committed to assisting individuals experiencing houselessness and the site redesign reflected this organizational value. In particular, the installation of a new restroom facility in the park was subject to extensive debate:

I remember so much conversation around the unhoused with the bathrooms because people were terrified of how do we keep them clean and safe? How do we prevent people from living in there? How do we prevent them from locking themselves in and harming themselves? (Rachel Hartman, Executive Director, DowntownDC).

Despite these challenges, DowntownDC remained committed to their goals for the refurbished park: "our intention is that we want people who are homeless to have these bathrooms to use." Rachel emphasized the importance of clear communication during this time,

saying that they consistently reiterated: “this park is for all. That language, we just had to keep hammering home to everybody.”

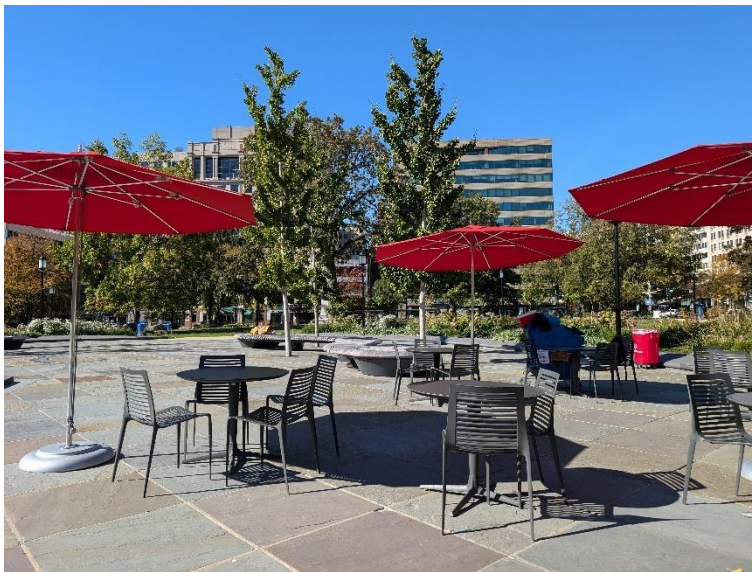
Franklin Park Photos

Figure S.1: An Entrance to the Park



Source: Helen Beck, October 2024

Figure S.2: Chairs and Tables Near the Fountain Plaza



Source: Helen Beck, 2024

Figure S.3: Signboard for the Downtown Day Services Center



Source: Helen Beck, 2024