

Sudden forced eviction of Tennessee encampment leaves 50 homeless inhabitants struggling to find shelter

By Zac Thorton
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A plan to develop the site of a decades-old homeless encampment in Chattanooga, Tennessee has led to the forced displacement of its approximately 50 inhabitants. The eviction takes place as temperatures in the state are beginning to drop and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage unabated.

On Tuesday, September 29, inhabitants of the campsite were abruptly met with bulldozers and excavators, along with police, and given as little as five minutes to collect their belongings and vacate the premises. The partially wooded lot, located approximately 10 minutes from downtown Chattanooga, has been vacant for at least two decades and is a well-known location in the community.

While plans to begin developing the lot, which is owned by the Walter A. Wood Supply Co., were no doubt in place for weeks if not months, inhabitants of the site indicated that they received no warnings of the company's plans. In addition, the various outreach groups and nonprofits who had a long history of intervening at the campsite were left scrambling to address the sudden displacement of the camp's inhabitants. Part of the reason for this is that the company neglected to file for the necessary permits to begin development, catching the city itself off guard.

Patricia Rector, a longtime inhabitant of the site, told the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, "They didn't tell us. I lived here 20 years, and they don't give me any notice before taking away my home." Crystal Ellis, who had been living at the camp for a year and a half, also speaking to the *Times Free Press*, said that the police "wouldn't let us get our tents, they wouldn't let us get half of our stuff, and they never gave us any warning." Scarlet Newsome, a wheelchair-bound

amputee who had been living at the site for three months, noted that she had been given just minutes to exit the site.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious position of the homeless population in the US, not only in terms of health, which was already suffering, but in access to much needed social services, such as housing. Many shelters have reduced their intakes to allow for social distancing, such as the Chattanooga Rescue Mission, which capped its men's shelter from 46 to 35 residents. This issue stands to worsen as the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic sends more and more people into the throes of destitution and city and state budgets are slashed to the bone.

However, even before the pandemic set in, the lack of affordable housing had been a severe issue in Chattanooga. In 2016, the Chattanooga City Council passed a controversial tax break program which required developers to make at least half of their rental units "affordable." In return, developers received a 10-year freeze on property taxes for new construction, or 14 years for rehabilitating existing sites. According to the city, "affordable housing" was meant for those who earn up to 80 percent of the area's median income. In 2018, this was listed by the US Census Bureau as \$43,964. In order to qualify for affordable housing, therefore, one can make up to \$35,000 a year.

A report published on August 31 by Zumper, a rental searching website, revealed that the city has experienced a 15.9 percent year-over-year increase in rent for one-bedroom apartments, with the average cost being \$950 per month. For two-bedroom rentals, the year-over-year increase was 15.1 percent, with an

average cost per month of \$1,070.

A comment posted by a worker on Facebook in response to the evictions in Chattanooga, which has received nearly 100 likes, underscores just how closely connected high housing costs are with homelessness. He wrote:

“I lived in a tent for a few months many years ago when I first came to [Chattanooga]. I had a new job, and I could not afford to find a place until I got established here. Nothing to be proud of, but it’s what I had to do to get started and get money back to my family. I was near a family of four in a similar tent struggling, but doing their best to stay together and survive.

“These people are not homeless,” he noted. “Those tents were their homes. Not good homes, not at all, especially when it gets cold, but they were homes and they had a place to survive. Now they’ll have to start again, or they won’t because they can’t.”

Chattanooga is the fourth largest city in Tennessee, with a population of 182,799 in 2019. The city is a significant logistics hub, intersecting with three major interstate highways, I-75, I-24 and I-59, and is located short distances from Atlanta, Georgia, Nashville, Tennessee, and Birmingham, Alabama.

A number of large corporations have located themselves in Chattanooga in recent years, reaping cushy tax breaks and other incentives. Amazon, run by the world’s richest man, CEO Jeff Bezos, has a fulfillment center in Chattanooga.

Volkswagen’s North American manufacturing headquarters is located in the city as well. The \$1 billion facility, which opened in 2011, has approximately 3,500 workers. Last year, the company announced plans for an \$800 million expansion for electric vehicle production.

The city is also a major technology hub, with an entire district dedicated to this section of industry.

Meanwhile, according to the Chattanooga Community Kitchen, a nonprofit which deals with homelessness, “over 4,000 individuals experience homelessness each year in Chattanooga, with over 1,000 homeless children in public schools. Each night, an estimated 600–700 individuals sleep outside or in shelters, with nearly 200 of them in families.”

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