

June 6, 2024

To: Mark Rohloff, City Manager, Oshkosh  
Jon Doemel, County Executive, Winnebago County  
Dean Smith, Chief of Police, Oshkosh  
John Matz, Sheriff, Winnebago County

Re: Orrin King Incident

It has been brought to our attention by the Winnebago County HELP program that a joint maneuver was attempted to remove unhoused individuals located near the west side of the Orrin King building, a public property. Our understanding is that OPD and WCSD were planning to issue tickets to unhoused individuals. Thankfully, there were multiple housing advocates on site to lessen the severity of an already challenging situation for those involved.

The Orrin King location is considered a safe location for many of our unhoused community members in Oshkosh. The grates outside the building provide a dry space throughout the year, and some heat during the harsh winter months. Many employees from Winnebago County go out of their way to provide kindness, meals, beverages and other care items to them.

In an attempt to understand the basis for this action, we would like a response to the following questions:

1. Does an ordinance exist for the City of Oshkosh and or Winnebago County that states that homelessness is an illegal and/or an arrestable offense? If so, please provide the ordinance number and its jurisdiction.
2. When cited, what are these individuals being cited with?
3. What initiated the potential clearing of the unhoused community at the Orrin King building ? Was there an incident or a citizen complaint? If so, please provide the public record for the incident or citizen complaint. Also to note that several months ago, OPD Chief Smith and OPD officers told members of ESTHER that OPD had no intention of ticketing the unhoused. What has changed?
4. What are the rules of engagement within OPD and WCSD on handling the members of the unhoused community? Please provide the numbers of instances where the Crisis Response Team has been deployed to assist in situations involving those who are unhoused.
5. How does OPD and WCSD determine the addresses of individuals experiencing homelessness?

It is our sincere hope that this type of action will not become commonplace in Oshkosh and Winnebago County. It exacerbates an already traumatic situation for all involved and is not an effective solution during a time of strained housing options.

It is prudent to encourage your officers to refrain from ticketing and harassing our unhoused community members, as this action does not provide a positive foundation for them to build from. "Move-along" orders and "camp evictions" result in loss of critical medications, survival gear that protect people from disease and environmental exposures, disrupts sleep, the stability of the mentally unwell, and creates challenges for social workers and health care providers.

We would like to invite all of you to have open conversations with us about your challenges on this matter. ESTHER meets regularly to discuss housing issues and solutions. Please let us know if this interests you.

Lastly, please provide a timely response to our letter and the questions contained in it but no later than 5 days from receiving it.

Our hope is that we can galvanize a positive relationship to build up the underhoused, not bury them.

Sincerely,

ESTHER Housing Advocates  
ESTHER Executive Director, Katie Olson  
ESTHER President, Connie Kanitz  
First Presbyterian Church  
Casa Esther  
Community Advocate - Bob Poeschl