



February 6, 2023

Ambassador Susan Rice
White House Domestic Policy Council

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Vice Chair, U.S. Interagency Council on
Homelessness
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

The Honorable Marcia Fudge
Secretary, U.S. Department of Housing and
Urban Development

Mr. Jeff Olivet
Director, U.S. Interagency Council on
Homelessness

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Chair, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior

The Honorable Chuck Sams III
Director, National Park Service

To Ambassador Rice, Secretary McDonough, Secretary Becerra, Secretary Haaland, Secretary Fudge, Director Sams, and Director Olivet:

We, members of the [National Coalition for Housing Justice](#) (NCHJ), write to urge the Biden-Harris Administration and the National Park Service **to immediately halt efforts to sweep encampments of unhoused people in McPherson Square and all other national parks in the absence of adequate housing. Instead, the Administration should build on the success of the [House America](#) initiative by working proactively with the District government to ensure it rehouses unsheltered individuals using best practices and proven solutions.** The solution to unsheltered homelessness is access to low-barrier housing, paired with voluntary supportive services – not inhumane and ineffective sweeps of homeless encampments.

NCHJ is a group of national organizations who have aligned behind housing justice in order to end homelessness. Our vision of housing justice guarantees opportunities for everyone in our country to have affordable, safe, accessible, stable housing. We take an approach grounded in racial justice, economic justice, and equity for all who have been marginalized or minoritized.

The National Park Service [announced](#) recently that it plans to sweep an encampment of unhoused individuals living in McPherson Square two months sooner than previously posted - in the dead of winter - before all unhoused individuals in the encampment receive housing. As of February 2, only 15 individuals – of the estimated 70 who live in the park – have been approved by the District government to receive available housing assistance. Even for those who have been approved for housing assistance, there are systemic barriers to identifying a unit and receiving services within the next 10 days. Furthermore, park residents have been awaiting case management for months, which was promised to them by the District government and would assist them in moving into housing.

The Administration should stand by the strategies and actions outlined in the recently released U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) [ALL IN: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness](#). The issue of federal land is specifically discussed in the chapter entitled *Improve Effectiveness of Homelessness Response Systems*. Using an all-of-government approach to addressing unsheltered homelessness, ALL IN commits USICH member agencies that own federal land to promote strong collaboration with local organizations in response to encampments that form on federal property (p. 52).

Each [member agency](#) of USICH – including the Department of the Interior, which oversees the National Park Service – worked to create the federal strategic plan and agreed to help communities respond to unsheltered homelessness by providing guidance and technical assistance on best practices. The Administration should draw on its own resources - including resources that may be available through non-traditional partners like the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the [Centers for Disease Control](#) - to address the needs of unhoused people living on its property. The decision by the National Park Service to sweep encampments in McPherson Square and elsewhere without first ensuring individuals have been connected to housing is in direct conflict with the agreements made by the Department of the Interior and others as members of USICH.

A sweep conducted by the National Park Service directly also undermines the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to using a people-centered, Housing First strategy. As described in the plan, the scheduled sweep will further harm individuals struggling to survive and make it even more difficult for them to exit homelessness:

“Unless encampment closures are conducted in a coordinated, humane, and solutions-oriented way that makes housing and supports adequately available, these ‘out of sight, out of mind’ policies can lead to lost belongings and identification which can set people back in their pathway to housing; breakdowns in connection with outreach teams, health care facilities, and housing providers; increased interactions with the criminal justice system; and significant traumatization— all of which can set people back in their pathway to housing and disrupt the work of ending homelessness.”

The administration recently celebrated the success of its [House America initiative](#), which rehoused 140,000 people and helped place more than 40,000 deeply affordable homes in the pipeline for construction. This initiative – as well as other efforts by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and USICH – recommitted to using a Housing First strategy to prioritize proven solutions to homelessness that should be the model for communities nationwide. At a time when harmful, dehumanizing measures to criminalize homelessness are gaining traction across the nation, we fear this departure by the Biden-Harris Administration from using evidence-based solutions sends the wrong message to these communities about how to address unsheltered homelessness.

Additionally, sweeping encampments undermines President Biden’s [Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#). Poverty, incarceration, segregation, discrimination, and lack of access to healthcare disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, and people of color and causes striking racial disparities among those experiencing homelessness. For example, Black people represent [45 percent](#) of the general population of the District of Columbia, but they account for [93% percent](#) of people experiencing homelessness. Sweeping McPherson Square and other federal land will further harm highly marginalized individuals and continue these racial disparities.

There must be adequate time for government and service providers to create and implement a plan to help connect individuals living in McPherson Square to housing, as called for in the Federal Strategic Plan. As owners of the property, the federal government could make a big difference by utilizing its resources and influence - in ways similar to disasters or public health emergencies.

We understand that the federal government cannot directly control the actions of the District government, but it can at least prohibit the National Park Service from participating in any encampment closure that is not compliant with the Federal Plan. We ask you to draw that clear line in the sand and call for the District government to immediately halt its efforts in order to provide stakeholders from community-based organizations, philanthropy and government, as well as those with lived experience, reasonable time to develop and carry out such a plan. Our organizations have offered the District government assistance in this area and are committed to doing what we can to convene these and other stakeholders to develop a solution.

As a courtesy we also want to inform you that many of our member organizations, including our staff, plan to be present in protest should the sweep go forward as currently scheduled on February 15. We would strongly prefer that the National Park Service and the District government cancel the sweep and work with us in the development of a comprehensive plan.

ALL IN recognizes that “This unprecedented rise in unsheltered homelessness—including visible encampments— is a direct result of a lack of accessible and low-barrier shelter options, insufficient supply of affordable housing, and voluntary service and support options. Deploying effective programs to meet their diverse needs takes unwavering commitment and unyielding creativity.” We urge the Administration to model that unwavering commitment and unyielding creativity for the nation, because if the Administration does not abide by its own plan, how can we expect communities struggling with these same issues to follow it?

We request a meeting with you to discuss this request further. To schedule a meeting or if you have any questions, please contact National Alliance to End Homelessness CEO Ann Oliva at aoliva@naeh.org or Funders Together to End Homelessness CEO Amanda Andere at amanda@funderstogether.org.

Sincerely,

National Coalition for Housing Justice