



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## AGENDA ITEM

### BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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**DATE:** May 20, 2025

**13**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

### SUBJECT

**REPORT ON EXISTING COUNTY POLICIES AND PRACTICES REGARDING HOMELESS ENCAMPMENT ABATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE ABATEMENT PROCESS IN HIGH FIRE-RISK AREAS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

### OVERVIEW

On February 25, 2025 (12), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to return in 90 days with: (1) a report on existing County policies and practices regarding the removal of illegal encampments, including emergency removal based on fire risk, and (2) recommendations to improve the encampment removal process. The Board further directed the CAO to identify high fire-risk areas within the County with significant homeless encampments and prioritize these areas for removal and issuance of stay-away orders as appropriate. The Board also directed the CAO to work with other jurisdictions interested in implementing similar measures and to not duplicate efforts previously directed on August 27, 2024 (17), which were reported back on March 11, 2025 (13).

In response to Board direction, the Public Safety Group Executive Office coordinated with multiple County departments, including the Departments of Parks & Recreation (DPR), Planning & Development Services (PDS) and Public Works (DPW), as well as the Finance & General Government Group, Health & Human Services Agency, County Fire, Office of Emergency Services, and Sheriff's Office. This collaborative effort resulted in the development of a comprehensive overview of current policies and practices related to homeless encampment abatement and identification of opportunities to strengthen interdepartmental coordination, improve situational awareness, and enhance operational effectiveness in support of encampment abatement activities, especially as it relates to fire risk.

Today's requested actions are for the Board to receive a report on existing County policies and practices regarding homeless encampment abatement and recommendations to improve abatement processes in high fire-risk areas.

### RECOMMENDATION(S)

**CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**

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Receive report on existing County policies and practices regarding homeless encampment abatement and recommendations to improve abatement processes in high fire-risk areas.

### **EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The 2024 Point-in-Time Count of people experiencing homelessness identified 10,605 individuals who were living on the streets or in shelters throughout San Diego County on one night. Of those, 201 were counted in the unincorporated areas of the county. The County engages people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, impacted community members, community partners, and other key stakeholders in developing County plans to address homelessness. Their feedback is valued and incorporated into the development of programs. The County has conducted lived experience forums in the North, East, and South Regions to gain valuable information on shaping programs and has implemented regular lived experience feedback questionnaires. Today's proposed actions are designed to strike a balance between protecting public safety and upholding the rights and dignity of individuals experiencing homelessness.

### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The recommended actions align with the County of San Diego's Sustainability Goal #4 of safeguarding the health and well-being of all residents by addressing fire risks and mitigating environmental impacts associated with encampments on public and private land within the unincorporated areas.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with today's recommendations to receive a report on existing County policies and practices regarding homeless encampment abatement and opportunities to improve abatement processes in high fire-risk areas. Staff will return to the Board for authorization and approval of funding source(s) for any future related actions with a fiscal impact. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

### **BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

### **ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

### **BACKGROUND**

On October 24, 2023 (19), the Board of Supervisors (Board) directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to draft an Unsafe Camping Ordinance that will allow law enforcement to prohibit and abate illegal encampments, remove improperly stored property on public property, and protect vacant property, such as the San Diego River corridor, from fire and pollution. On August 27, 2024 (17), the Board directed the CAO to ensure that the draft Unsafe Camping Ordinance brought before the Board includes provisions to address the threat of fires occurring from illegal encampments. On March 11, 2025 (13), staff presented options to the Board to enhance the current County Ordinance (County Regulatory Code Section 73.108) to address Unauthorized Camping in the Unincorporated Area. On May 6, 2025 (19), the Board approved the introduction of an

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ordinance relating to unauthorized camping and the protection of property owned, leased, or managed by the County. And, on May 20, 2025, the Board will consider approving and adopting the ordinance.

Separately, on February 25, 2025 (12), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to return in 90 days with: (1) a report on existing County policies and practices regarding the removal of illegal encampments, including emergency removal based on fire risk, and (2) recommendations to improve the encampment removal process. The Board further directed the CAO to identify high fire-risk areas within the County with significant homeless encampments and prioritize these areas for removal and issuance of stay-away orders as appropriate, particularly during high fire risk times. The Board also directed the CAO to work with other jurisdictions interested in implementing similar measures. Additionally, the Board directed the CAO to not duplicate efforts previously directed on August 27, 2024 (17), which were reported back on March 11, 2025 (13) and again on May 6, 2025 (19).

Approximately 80% of the unincorporated area falls within a Very High or High Fire Hazard Severity Zone. These designations are determined by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and are based on a combination of critical factors that influence fire behavior. These factors include, but are not limited to, the density and type of surrounding vegetation, the steepness and orientation of slopes, prevailing wind patterns, historical fire occurrence, and proximity to wildland-urban interface areas.

In addition to these geographic and environmental risks, the San Diego Region is also vulnerable to periodic weather conditions when dry, gusty winds (such as the Santa Ana winds), low relative humidity, and elevated temperatures align to create critically hazardous fire weather. When such conditions are forecasted, the National Weather Service (NWS) may issue a Red Flag Warning to notify local agencies and the general public of the increased threat of wildfires.

During the first quarter of 2025, the NWS issued three Red Flag Warnings, with each event averaging four days in duration. In 2024, the NWS issued two Red Flag Warnings for the San Diego Region, each lasting an average of three days. In both 2023 and 2022, there were no Red Flag Warnings issued in San Diego County.

***Current Abatement Practices***

The Departments of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and Public Works (DPW) actively track and monitor known encampment sites located in County parks and those in proximity to the County-maintained Road network, including culverts, channels and Flood Control easements, to assess potential risks to public health, safety, and the environment. In addition, encampments situated on private property are monitored by the Department of Planning & Development Services (PDS) in response to public nuisance complaints. Monitoring sites enables County departments to identify emerging concerns, coordinate timely outreach efforts, and determine when abatement may be needed.

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For public property, procedures begin with a preliminary site assessment to determine whether an encampment presents an imminent threat to life, health, safety, or critical infrastructure. During this assessment, staff evaluate whether exigent circumstances warrant immediate removal or whether the standard abatement notification process should be followed. In non-emergency situations, encampment cleanup activities consist of posting a 72-hour Notice to Vacate; offering resources, such as access to self-sufficiency services, food assistance, housing programs, and employment; and providing individuals private property storage for up to 90 days. In cases where immediate abatement is necessary, staff may coordinate with law enforcement, fire, EMS, and hazardous waste clean-up resources, depending on the nature of the situation. Immediate abatement may be warranted when there is a clear and present threat to public health and safety. Examples include an active fire, sewage overflow, or the outbreak of a communicable disease.

Because Red Flag Warnings cover large geographic areas and do not account for specific localized risk factors, the issuance of a Red Flag Warning alone is not enough to establish an imminent threat. Additional site-specific conditions, such as observed activities within the encampment, including open-flame cooking or smoking, as well as the proximity of the encampment to flammable vegetation, must be taken into consideration when evaluating overall risk and determining whether exigent circumstances exist that would warrant immediate action.

When abatement is deemed necessary on private property, PDS follows nuisance abatement procedures as outlined in County Regulatory Code Section 16.201-16.218. If staff determines the nuisance constitutes an immediate threat to public health and safety, PDS may summarily abate the public nuisance as outlined in the section 16.203.

On private property, the County may intervene when a public nuisance, such as excessive trash, biohazardous waste, or unpermitted structures, is identified and the owner is either unwilling or unable to address the issue after being given notice and an opportunity to remedy the situation. In such cases, priority is generally given to properties presenting significant health or safety risks.

Encampment cleanup operations are focused on the clearance of trash, debris, and other waste materials. These operations are carried out collaboratively, often involving multiple County departments and partner agencies, to ensure a coordinated, compassionate, and effective response that prioritizes public health and safety while supporting the well-being of individuals experiencing homelessness. On the day of the cleanup, biohazardous waste is sanitized, and waste is sorted and bagged for proper disposal. Abandoned personal property is collected, labeled, and stored for up to 90 days to allow for retrieval by its owner. During cleanup activities, individuals must temporarily vacate the area to allow for the safe and efficient removal of waste. Once the waste removal process is complete, individuals may return to the area unless access is otherwise prohibited. Post-abatement monitoring is regularly conducted, and additional cleanups are scheduled, as needed.

In 2024, DPR monitored 14 active encampment sites, conducting 1,536 site visits and removing 212 cubic yards of trash and 104 gallons of hazardous or biological waste. Additionally, in 2024, DPW monitored 119 encampment sites, conducting 2,825 site visits. A total of 483 cleanups were

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performed, resulting in the removal of 1,237 cubic yards of trash and debris, 343 gallons of hazardous waste, and 558 gallons of biohazardous waste. And, as of April 23, 2025, PDS is actively monitoring 21 sites at least once a month that are in violation.

Existing state laws provide legal mechanisms that can be utilized to prevent individuals from unlawfully camping in prohibited areas. This includes provisions within the Penal Code that address offenses such as trespassing, loitering, and illegal lodging, among other acts. These provisions grant law enforcement deputies the authority to enforce and hold individuals accountable for conduct deemed unlawful, as defined under these code sections.

In certain circumstances, courts may issue stay-away orders as a means of restricting an individual's access to specific locations. A stay-away order is a judicial directive issued by a court that prohibits an individual from approaching or contacting a specified person or from entering a designated area. Such orders are imposed in a criminal case as conditions of probation or release, particularly in cases involving allegations of harassment, threats, or other behaviors that may pose a risk to public safety or individual well-being. The issuance and enforcement of stay away orders must remain consistent with constitutional protections, which includes ensuring that affected individuals are afforded adequate notice and the opportunity for due process in accordance with legal standards.

***Emergency Housing Solutions***

The Board has taken multiple actions to address shelter and service needs over the past several years including approval of compassionate emergency housing solutions and pathways to housing projects to establish shelter capacity for the unincorporated communities. Current emergency housing options for the unincorporated communities include Regional Homeless Assistance Program (RHAP) and two safe parking sites.

RHAP is currently the primary emergency housing program for the unincorporated communities. RHAP current sheltering capacity is 250 households on any given night. It operates at near capacity every evening. This program uses local hotels/motels as emergency housing and provides wrap around services including weekly case management and housing navigation to permanent housing. Since 2020, over 1,800 individuals have been served with 39% exiting to permanent housing. Two safe parking programs provide 44 safe spaces for those experiencing homelessness in their vehicles in addition to case management and housing navigation to more stable housing options.

In addition to these options, the Board approved the design, development, and construction of Troy Street sleeping cabins project. This project will add an additional option for people experiencing homelessness in unincorporated communities.

RHAP, safe parking programs, and the Troy Street sleeping cabins project are integral components of a coordinated approach designed to provide temporary housing and connect individuals to services, treatment, and other resources that support their transition to permanent housing.

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Participation in emergency housing programs is voluntary, and these programs frequently operate with waitlists due to high demand.

***Abatement Process Improvements***

Staff have identified opportunities to strengthen and improve current encampment monitoring and abatement practices and enhance efforts to disseminate fire risk information to individuals experiencing homelessness. The recommended actions outlined below can be implemented using existing department resources.

County departments, including DPR, DPW, and PDS, will work collaboratively to explore and identify measures to prioritize the monitoring and abatement of encampment sites located within Very High and High Fire Severity Zones. As part of this effort, departments will (1) evaluate existing practices and identify opportunities to standardize monitoring and abatement procedures across the enterprise, (2) evaluate criteria currently used to prioritize sites for monitoring and abatement to ensure dynamic and emerging risks are adequately represented, and (3) explore the feasibility of increasing the frequency of site monitoring and abatement of encampments located within Very High and High Fire Severity Zones, particularly during times of elevated risk. Departments will consider the staffing, funding, and other resources needed, such as mapping and other situational awareness tools, to increase monitoring and abatement activities as part of this assessment. The objective of these efforts is to promote greater consistency, operational efficiency, and interdepartmental coordination related to encampment monitoring and abatement activities, with a particular focus on sites situated in areas of elevated fire risk. These assessments and evaluations are anticipated to be completed within a six-month timeframe. Upon completion, departments will use these findings to inform operational enhancements and identify areas that may require additional investment in order to be implemented.

County departments, including DPR, DPW, PDS, County Fire, OES, Sheriff's Office, and Office of Homeless Solutions, will also work collaboratively to explore opportunities to partner with internal and external stakeholders to enhance fire-risk information sharing with unhoused populations. As part of these efforts, departments will (1) develop outreach materials that communicate critical information related to fire risk and prohibited activities in high fire-risk areas and distribute these materials to outreach teams, service providers, County departments, other jurisdictions, and relevant stakeholders for ongoing dissemination to unhoused populations and (2) explore avenues for disseminating fire weather and/or Red Flag Warning information to unhoused populations, especially in high fire-risk areas. Materials may include printed flyers, signage, digital resources, and other media formats suitable for broad distribution. Departments will consider operational feasibility and resources needed to enhance information sharing activities. The overarching goal of this effort is to increase awareness and improve risk reduction among unhoused individuals in high fire-risk areas. The development of outreach materials and assessment are anticipated to be completed within a six-month timeframe. Upon completion, departments will facilitate the dissemination of outreach materials and will use assessment findings to inform future efforts.

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Any expansion of activities beyond the opportunities outlined above, and existing efforts, would require comprehensive analysis to identify specific resource needs and the associated fiscal impacts.

***Jurisdictional Coordination***

The Board directed the CAO to work with other jurisdictions interested in implementing similar measures to enhance regional fire prevention efforts. To share information with jurisdictional partners regarding the County's encampment abatement efforts, departments will leverage existing regional coordination groups, such as the Fire Chiefs Association and the Unified Disaster Council. These established forums provide an ongoing platform for interagency collaboration, knowledge exchange, and alignment of regional strategies.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

The recommended actions align with the Community Strategic Initiative in the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by supporting opportunities to enhance the safety and well-being of our communities and environments.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Strong", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

*Andrew Strong for*

EBONY N. SHELTON  
Chief Administrative Officer

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

N/A