

Interview with Austin Davis



On any given day, roughly 10,000 individuals in Arizona experience homelessness as reported by Continuums of Care to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Living in the streets create daily struggles including working while living in a tent or shelter,

dealing with addiction and mental illness, and figuring out safe sleeping conditions.

To help combat the complex social issue, The Human Services Campus put forth a request before the Phoenix City Council to increase the number of shelter beds on the campus due to the Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS) being at capacity every night. Currently, CASS's capacity is 425 individuals, although its certificate of occupancy allows for 700. The request is asking for approval to add 275 beds to CASS, create a 24/7 low barrier shelter in Andre House, and adding 200 HOC beds in the St. Vincent de Paul dining room and Lodestar Day Resource Center during extreme summer and winter weather.

More than 17,000 people have shown support through signed petitions, written letters of support, and endorsements by the Central City Village Planning Committee and the Phoenix Human Relations Commission. To understand why advocates and activists support the request, HSC interviewed individuals and asked why the expansion is a necessary step for combatting homelessness.

The first person interviewed was Austin Davis, a 20-year-old poet, and Arizona State University student. Davis is the Community Outreach Coordinator for Arizona Jews For Justice. He leads the unsheltered outreach project and every week travels to The Zone in Phoenix, along with other cities across AZ. He has conversations with folks and hands out care packs, water, food, blankets, jackets, sleeping bags, and other items to help keep people warm. Each care pack includes a handmade face mask, hand sanitizer, soap, shampoo, deodorant, a razor, a pair of socks, feminine hygiene products, non-perishable food, and other essential items. I interviewed Davis and asked him several questions about his stance on the HSC request and why he supports it.

How did you get involved with the social issue of homelessness?

We started this project after visiting The Zone shortly after the pandemic began to dramatically impact our state at the end of March. We saw that many people didn't have face masks or sanitary items necessary to keep them safe from the virus.

From there, the project really just grew. We currently collaborate and have partnered with ASU Project Humanities, Let's Be Better Humans, The International Rescue Committee, and many amazing volunteers and humans all over the state.

Our project is organic and completely community-led. Folks join me to deliver, donate items, make care packs from home, and everyone is pitching in to help in whatever way they can. It's so beautiful and it inspires me every day to keep going and keep trying to reach more and more people.

What is your stance on adding shelter beds to the HSC?

We urgently need to add more shelter beds to the Human Services Campus. More and more people in our state and across the nation are currently experiencing homelessness and more

and more unsheltered people are dying. While adding more shelter beds to HSC isn't a long-term solution, a band-aid will hopefully prevent the wound from becoming more infected.

This is especially important right now because of the current pandemic. More and more people are losing their jobs, getting sick, having to pay for unforeseen medical bills, and being evicted. I fear that the number of people experiencing houselessness in AZ will dramatically rise, and we need to act and respond and put preventative measures in place to combat this issue.

Housing is a human right. Access to food and water is a human right. Support and services for addiction and mental health should be provided for all who need it.

In many areas, the price of living is high and the wages people are paid are low, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Life can be incredibly difficult and many people are faced with challenges and situations that force them into houselessness. A little empathy goes a long way.

Why is the issue important to you?

These folks are my friends. They're human and necessary and needed and I feel deep love and connection with the people I meet and talk with. We're all connected by our shared humanity and we need to stand together, hold each other up, and work together to fight for a brighter future for everyone.

I've seen people pass out from heat exhaustion. I've seen people sleeping on the sidewalks in the heat of the AZ summer because there was nowhere else to go and because they were too dehydrated to stand.

I've met someone who sleeps by an electrical box at night to keep warm, someone who was having a panic attack, someone who was crying because all their belongings were flooded in a storm, someone who had been hit by a car,

I've met poets and rappers and philosophers and artists, and I feel love for all these individuals and hope to spread a little care, hope, understanding, empathy and solidarity to those on the streets.