



City of Arts & Innovation

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Safety Concerns Drive Effort to Get Homeless Individuals Out of River Bottom

Fires from encampments, potential flooding from rain pose a dual threat near Santa Ana River

RIVERSIDE, Calif. – The City of Riverside stepped up efforts to get homeless individuals out of the Santa Ana River bottom this week, including warnings broadcast by helicopter, because of safety concerns for the people living there and for residents of surrounding neighborhoods.

People living in the river bottom are believed to be responsible for recent fires in the area, including a large fire last month near Mission Inn Avenue and the river that required the evacuation of downtown neighborhoods. They also are in danger themselves as a result of rising river levels driven by this week's rain.

“Our primary concern is always our residents’ safety,” Mayor Rusty Bailey said. “The city has made great strides expanding outreach services, housing and support for our most vulnerable neighbors, but we must also protect neighbors living in housing near the river.”

Riverside personnel from the Office of Homeless Solutions, as well as the police, fire, parks and recreation, code enforcement and public works departments went into the river bottom area near Fairmount Park, starting on Friday and continuing into this week, to warn people living there of the pending flood danger and clear encampments that could pose a fire risk. When possible, Riverside personnel notified homeless individuals in advance that their camps were subject to being removed, allowing them time to vacate the premises.

City employees and their counterparts from other agencies also conducted outreach to homeless individuals, letting them know about available services that can help them begin to transition out of homelessness. In this instance, mental health outreach workers from Riverside University Health System also participated and made contact with several homeless individuals, as did representatives of Operation SafeHouse, a non-profit organization that works with homeless youth.

“The recent fires show the danger that heat and cooking fires pose to everyone living in the immediate vicinity, including other people living in the river bottom,” said City Councilmember Mike Gardner, who represents the downtown area. “I am glad to see our city reaching out to these individuals to

mitigate that danger and also offer services to help them begin the process of leaving homelessness behind.”

The Riverside Police Department’s helicopter, called Air-1, flew over the river bottom to broadcast flash flood warnings to people believed to be living below. The Santa Ana River slows to a trickle during the summer months, but can roar back to life in the event of hard and/or sustained rain.

The efforts undertaken this week were in addition to regular patrols and clean-ups designed to reduce the incidence of camping in the river bottom, remove trash and debris and cut back on the risk of fire. The camps, and the fires that homeless individuals set there for warmth and/or cooking, pose a danger to people and property in areas where homes are close by.

Police officers involved in the effort located a stolen car that was returned to its owner and arrested two people who were either in possession of narcotics, wanted on outstanding warrants connected to earlier felony crimes, or both.

“From fire to potential floods, the danger in the river bottom makes it unsuitable for living,” Mayor Pro Tem Chris MacArthur said. “City staff, including our first responders, are to be commended for this pro-active approach.”