



Wayne Woodin, 56, who has been homeless for about four years, sits with a meal provided by members of the East Salem Seventh-day Adventist Church as advocates for those experiencing homelessness gather under the Marion Street Bridge in Salem on Sunday. PHOTOS BY ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Advocates for homeless stage rally under bridge

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About 20 people attended a rally Sunday evening under the Marion Street Bridge to support volunteers who feed Salem's homeless there on a weekly basis.

Advocates from ARCHES, the Homeless Coalition and other organizations gathered at Marion Square Park around 5:30 p.m. City Manager Steve Powers asked the city public works director to stop issuing permits for distributing food this week.

Volunteers with the East Salem Seventh-day Adventist Church set up tables with trays of meatloaf, potatoes, rice and soup for their weekly food distribution — a tradition that began 15 years ago.

51-year-old Athena Grey, of Salem, has been volunteering to feed the homeless for five years with her church. The homeless come for their own reasons, whether they're in a long-term situation or just there for social interaction, she said.

"I'm hoping that we can find a place to continue feeding and continue supporting them," Grey said. "I get that it needs to be cleaned, but the need is so complex...They're not just homeless, they're hungry."

Debbra Graham, 54, of Salem, who has been staying at the homeless camp for the past week, was one of the residents who attended the meal Sunday night.

"I'm diabetic," Graham said. "I have to watch what I eat, but I need to eat. I don't know where I'd be without (the meal). The risk of losing it is a scary thought."

City officials posted a warning last week that they would be clearing out the homeless encampment under the bridge, "to protect the health and safety of those choosing to camp under the bridges" said City Manager Steve Powers.

An estimated 15 to 30 people sleep under the Marion Street Bridge each night.

Jimmy Jones, executive director of the nearby Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, said volunteers who have hosted dinnertime meals at the bridge will be allowed to do so on the ARCHES Project parking lot starting this weekend.



Bob Francis speaks as a meal is served under the Marion Street Bridge by members of the East Salem Seventh-day Adventist Church on Sunday.

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But he stressed that people will not be allowed to camp in the parking lot.

Volunteer Lorrie Walker, of Salem, said the ARCHES parking lot is not a viable option because it's not covered.

Walker said the bridge should have been cleaned up months ago to prevent halting meal distributions.

"This has gone on to the point where the city has lumped the camping and the food being served all as one problem, and it's not," she said. "It's totally separate."

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Statesman Journal Reporter Jonathan Bach contributed to this report.