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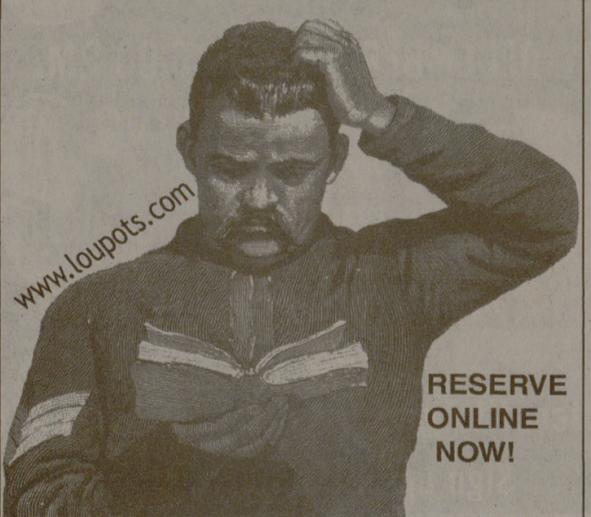
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# Homeless village reaches crossroads

By Sarah Linn  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND, Ore. — On a one-acre patch of asphalt near the airport, about 80 homeless people are living in shelters slapped together out of scavenged planks, plastic, sheetrock and cardboard. But this is no ordinary shantytown. Dignity Village, as it is called, is an unusual social experiment: a government-sanctioned encampment for the homeless.

Besides holding a city lease, it has its own government, maintains a Web site and operates as a nonprofit corporation. Residents get free legal advice from local lawyers, medical aid from a homeless shelter, and financial support from a national network of charitable donors.

"There really isn't another model in the country that is as well-organized as Dignity Village," said Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C. "It's pretty revolutionary."

Two years after it was built, though, Dignity Village has reached a crossroads.

Its most recent lease having expired at the end of October, residents have asked the city to extend their stay for up to 10 years. They have also requested that the city stop charging rent for the site and make thousands of dollars in improvements at the location.

The request has set off a debate among city officials over whether to sink money into the project or put an end to

the whole experiment and encourage homeless people to go shelters instead.

Some officials say that shelters do a better job of providing health and job services.

"The shelter system is more successful and more compassionate," said Michael Harrison, aide to Jim Francesconi, one of four city commissioners. "Before the city invests more money into Dignity Village, we should know that there are actual people that have been helped."

Dignity Village's leaders argue they have already shown they are helping the homeless.

Benjamin Howard, a homeless man who serves as Dignity Village's fire chief, said it is a place where people can develop a sense of stability, start looking for work, and then move into low-income housing. About 200 have taken that step in the past two years, he said.

Portland has an estimated 2,000 homeless people, and 20 homeless shelters run by the city and private organizations.

Other cities generally do not tolerate large-scale encampments of homeless people. In October, Seattle cracked down on "The Jungle," a homeless camp in the woods. In Anchorage, Alaska, authorities cleared out about 50 sites in May because of the danger posed by the homeless people's campfires.

Michael Stoops, director of community organizing for the National Coalition for the Homeless, said he believes Dignity Village is the nation's only camp for the homeless that is officially supported by a city government.

Homeless people set up the encampment in September 2001 and won permission from the City Council. Dignity Village pays the city more than \$20,000 a year for rent, water and garbage pickup, with most of the money coming from donations. It has rudimentary utilities, including portable potties and electricity provided by a windmill.

"It's a good resource that's helped a lot of vulnerable and lost people get back on their feet," said City Commissioner Erik Sten, one of Dignity Village's biggest supporters. He said a 10-year extension may be too long and the city should not pick up all the costs the residents have requested for safety and sewage improvements.

Many homeless people prefer Dignity Village to shelters because it offers self-government and more freedom. Unlike shelters, it has no curfew.

It is governed by four board officers, who handle administrative concerns, and 11 council members, who manage day-to-day operations. Residents who become violent or disrespectful or use drugs or alcohol are given 24 hours outside of Dignity Village to cool off. Repeat offenders can be expelled.

"We've never had a rape here. We've never had a murder," said village chairman Jack Tafari. "If a girl goes 'peep,' there's 12 big, hairy guys there in a second." Villagers are required to contribute to the camp's upkeep, either through chores or by working outside Dignity Village.

## Home for homeless

An experimental government-sanctioned encampment for the homeless called Dignity Village is the subject of debate among Portland city officials. Critics say shelters can provide better health and job services than the village. Built in 2001, the encampment pays the city more than \$20,000 in rent, water and garbage pickup.



SOURCES: Associated Press; ESRI

"This is not utopia," Howard said. "It's not where I really want to be. But it's a better than a lot of places I've been in."

The residents are being allowed to stay until a deal is worked out on their proposal.

Seventeen-year-old Cal Spry lives at Dignity Village with her mother and father. Spry is working to get her high school diploma.

"My options were the street or the village," she said. "And thank God the village was there."

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### TCEQ to review agency enforcement practices

AUSTIN — The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality will conduct a review of how the agency enforces environmental laws, Executive Director Margaret Hoffman said Monday.

"Enforcement is one of the fundamental jobs of the TCEQ," Hoffman said. "It must deter wrongdoing and ensure that the environment is protected. We need to make sure that we're doing it right."

The commission will study how the agency uses criteria to decide whether to pursue enforcement; whether the agency's enforcement is consistent across regions and programs; how the agency's implementation of new compliance history requirements is working; and whether the agency's penalty policy helps make sure that people comply.

TCEQ Chairwoman Kathleen Hartnett

White said the review will aid the agency in determining what are the most effective means of deterring violations and facilitating compliance with its rules.

The agency will prepare a timeline and detailed plan for the review.

Environmental advocacy groups said they were optimistic about the TCEQ's announcement.

"Texas polluters have been getting off the hook for far too long," said Luke Metzger, an advocate for the Texas Public Interest Research Group. "TCEQ needs to rebuild the public's trust by creating a tough enforcement program that swiftly and strongly punishes environmental scofflaws."

#### Agreement reached in pollution case

AUSTIN — A rock-mining company accused of polluting the Brazos River with sediment has agreed to remain shut

down until it develops and implements a pollution plan that meets Texas Commission of Environmental Quality approval, an agency spokesman said Monday.

Osborn Stone Co. Inc. reached an agreement over the weekend with environmental quality officials and the attorney general's office, spokesman Andy Saenz said.

The agreement awaits court approval, Saenz said.

A state district court had issued a temporary restraining order against Osborn last month, shutting down its mining operations at its quarry in Palo Pinto County.

Under the agreement, the company must put together a plan that established practices and controls that will prevent or reduce pollution in storm water discharges from the facility.

Osborn did not immediately return a call Monday from The Associated Press

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