

Atkinson Street and surrounding areas

RECOMMENDATIONS for ACTION

CURRENT SITUATION

The conditions of life in and around Atkinson Street in Roxbury are becoming untenable. What some view as “unsightly” is the visible end-product of systemic, intertwined issues, including rising housing costs, income inequality, an escalation in the overdose crisis, unmet need for mental health and addiction services, racism and discrimination, and serial displacement, among other problems. The overdose crisis has disproportionately impacted Black and Latino men in Massachusetts, with significant increases in overdose deaths in the past year. Recent escalations in violence on and around Atkinson Street have added to a sense of urgency around resolving what has become essentially a humanitarian emergency.

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, with its partners, has continued to offer a version of “disaster medicine” to those in this area. Our teams provide street-level overdose response, wound care, HIV and hepatitis C prevention, testing and treatment, case management, and substance use and mental health services.

Boston’s approach to housing and homelessness has kept its number of unsheltered residents relatively small in comparison to most other large U.S. cities. Yet we’re now struggling with how to address a concerning rise in the number of unsheltered individuals¹ together with surging fentanyl and methamphetamine use. While encampments like on Atkinson Street can pose public health risks, the dispersal of people from those areas, without viable alternative spaces, can also generate health risks. It also counter-productively transforms a public health problem into a criminal-legal one, and does not resolve homelessness.



At BHCHP, we strive for a world without stigma. While medication for addiction treatment is highly effective, not everyone is ready or able to stop using today. And the reality of living without a home, without material security, in a stigmatized climate, sometimes without a family or other supports, often creates barriers to recovery. We advocate for a stronger mental health and addiction treatment system, together with more housing opportunities for all, including people who use drugs.

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TAKE A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

We are gravely concerned that dispersal of people from Atkinson, without viable alternative spaces to go, will reduce access to lifesaving overdose prevention and reversals, limit diagnostic testing for HIV amid what is now a large and sustained HIV outbreak, and disrupt efforts to prevent and treat HIV, hepatitis C, COVID, soft tissue infections, and other urgent health issues. Treatment regimens are disrupted by dispersal, because many people rely on nurses in this area to deliver and monitor their medications. We recommend a focus on:

- Addressing basic sanitation needs (running water, restrooms, showers, etc.)
- Low-threshold addiction treatment (more accessible methadone, buprenorphine, residential treatment)
- Low-barrier mental health services, including street-based & drop-in options
- More treatment options for monolingual Spanish speakers and women
- Centering racial and gender equity in policies and programming



PROMOTE HARM REDUCTION

In cities around the world, harm reduction has been a central feature of resolving crises like this one.² We recommend an immediate focus on evidence-based approaches to minimizing complications of substance use disorders, including:

- Safe consumption spaces³
- Increased access to sterile syringes, to reduce infectious disease transmission³
- Increased access to naloxone for overdose response



OFFER VIABLE ALTERNATIVES

With dispersal strategies in the past, people have not had alternative places to go. Shelters as currently designed are not the right environment for everyone, and they are also not a solution to homelessness. During the COVID pandemic, it’s been clear that we can indeed provide rapid access to dignified housing during a crisis, keeping our whole community safe. We need, in neighborhoods across the city:

- More transitional & permanent housing
- Hotels & temporary shelters, using a harm reduction approach
- A focus on Housing First, harm reduction housing, & supportive services
- Other safe places where people can rest, wash, be protected from the elements



BE COLLABORATIVE & INCLUSIVE

The City should develop a coordinated approach that:

- Communicates openly and often with all in the area
- Fosters collaboration between law enforcement and community partners
- Involves people who are homeless and who use drugs in policy & program design
- Broadens the range of local partners working on improvements

References:

¹ Batko, S., Gillespie, S., Ballard, K. et al. (2020). Alternatives to arrests and police responses to homelessness. Urban Institute. Washington, DC. ² Waal, H., Clausen, T., Cjersing, L., & Gossop, M. (2014). Open drug scenes: responses of five European cities. BMC public health, 14(1), 1-12. ³ Harm Reduction Commission. (2019, March). Report. <https://www.mass.gov/lists/harm-reduction-commission-report>
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