



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
National Mall and Memorial Parks
1100 Ohio Drive, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20242-0003



January 27, 2023

Wayne Turnage

Deputy Mayor for the District of Columbia Health and Human Services
Director, District of Columbia Department of Health Care Finance
441 4th Street, NW, 900S
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Deputy Mayor Turnage,

The National Park Service (NPS) will clear the unsheltered encampment at McPherson Square on February 15, 2023, shifting the closure date up two months from the initial posted closure date of April 12, 2023. The updated closure date responds to the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services' (DMHHS) January 9 request that NPS close the McPherson Square encampment on February 1 because high levels of illegal drug activity and other dangerous and unsafe activities significantly impede social services outreach and endanger social services providers, mental health clinicians, unsheltered individuals, and the public. Following DMHHS' request, the NPS considered the recommendation of the United States Park Police (USPP) in determining the February 15 closure date.

We acknowledge DMHHS' assessment that this encampment's size and constitution has surpassed the District's ability to provide effective social services at this location. Specifically, the District reports that contracted social service providers and mental health clinicians feel increasingly unsafe working at McPherson Square and are unable to provide on-site services to an encampment of this size. The McPherson Square encampment is the largest in the District with over 70 individuals and has experienced a rapid and steady growth rate over the past few months. Continued increases to this high-density encampment challenge trash removal, sanitation support, and emergency response.

USPP's targeted law enforcement operations at McPherson Square indicate growing criminal operations and individuals potentially linked with high levels of violence and illegal activity at the Scott Circle encampment prior to its closure on December 15. The 15-tent Scott Circle encampment included both an attempted homicide and resulted in a seizure of over \$35,000 of narcotics and four firearms including a gun with a high-capacity magazine. Possible movement of the Scott Circle criminal element to the 70+ person McPherson Square encampment is likely to lead to rapid escalation of public health and safety threats in this high-density encampment. USPP's directed work to identify and isolate criminal actors has resulted in approximately 30 arrests at McPherson Square over the last 11 months to include assault, threats, wanted individuals, and narcotics crimes. Over the past six months, three unsheltered individuals died at McPherson Square due to exposure or drug overdoses. The latest death occurred on January 10, 2023. On January 21, an unsheltered individual was found deceased just off park property in this area. NPS has received increasing community complaints of trash and debris blocking public access, prostitution, open air drug and alcohol use, and public harassment of residents and visitors to the area.

The NPS is not a social service agency and relies on the District and its contracted social service providers for expertise and recommendations on unsheltered encampments. In response to the District's earlier request, NPS shifted previous plans to clear the McPherson Square encampment in October 2022 to April 12, 2023, outside hypothermia season, allowing social service providers almost six months to move unsheltered individuals to permanent housing. The NPS makes every effort to schedule encampment closures outside hypothermia season except in cases requiring immediate action to address imminent health and safety risks.

We appreciate DMHHS' assurances that the February 15 closure of the McPherson Square encampment will not substantially impact the ongoing efforts to move unsheltered individuals into permanent housing. Up until the recent development of severe health and safety issues, service providers have engaged in intensive outreach to unsheltered individuals willing to accept services for close to four months, following NPS' issuance of the formal closure notice on October 25. We understand from our consultation with DMHHS that an additional month of engagement will not result in a meaningful increase in the number of individuals moved into housing. Additionally, individuals choose to camp in the park despite the availability of shelter options. Although social service providers continue to actively work with individuals at McPherson Square who are willing to accept outreach, the encampment has many individuals who have repeatedly refused any contact with service providers.

We recognize that DMHHS and its agencies have committed staff, social services, and resources to support NPS' planning and clean-up operations on February 15. The NPS and the District will form a multi-agency coordination team to include the Departments of Human Services (DHS) and Behavioral Health (DBH). We also acknowledge and appreciate the District's implementation of an immediate engagement plan to intensify service outreach to individuals who have previously refused services.

The NPS will issue a Record of Determination for the temporary closure of McPherson Square stating the reasons, timing, and duration of the closure. We will provide ample notice of the temporary park closure in alignment with the District's 14-day policy. The NPS will perform documented onsite due diligence of the park closure, including:

- Written and verbal 14-day notice, including notification signs of the impending temporary closure at the site itself,
- In-person consultation with individuals at the encampment to provide notice and to determine property ownership,
- Placing unattended belongings into storage, which may be reclaimed by the property owner if done within 60 days,
- Collaboration with DMHHS to provide support to the unsheltered community, and
- Consistent communication among the NPS, the District, the unsheltered community, and the public on the timing of the temporary park closures.

The NPS will resume enforcement of the no camping regulation at McPherson Square following the encampment closure on February 15. The park area will be temporarily fenced for rehabilitation.

I look forward to our continued collaboration with DMHHS. You can reach me at 202-245-4661.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey P. Reinbold
Superintendent
National Mall and Memorial Parks