Arrests Not Solution to Underlying Vagrancy Issues

Thursday, 20 June 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/130621.arrests_not_vagrancy_solution.mp3{/audio}

Jay Barrett/KMXT

Earlier this week we heard from Kodiak’s police chief on his department’s response to increased complaints of vagrants being an issue downtown. During that interview with KMXT, T.C. Kamai also spoke a little about the underlying issues in Kodiak that contribute to vagrancy.

“You know, amongst my staff we’ve had this discussion that we’re dealing with issues of chronic homelessness, and unemployment, mental illness and substance abuse. Unfortunately, those are issues we are not resourced to be able to address," he said. "The easiest and simplest thing we can do is if we see a violation of law is to take action. Arresting these folks doesn’t necessarily solve the problem – it’s an interim fix. So until I think, those root issues are addressed, we’re likely to see a continuation I think of the same of behavior we’ve been experiencing now for a few months.”

Much of Kodiak’s transient community spend time around our town’s harbors, and the Brother Francis Homeless Shelter ushers its guests out during the day, which gives the homeless very few options to seek cover during Kodiak’s often inclement weather. A few find shelter in the taverns that ring the Mall, and many spend time in the Kodiak public library, just a few yards from the downtown Y. However that last option will be going away – or at least made much more difficult – when the library moves from the center of town to the highest point on Signal Hill.

“That’s a good question, and that’s a question we’ve been asking ourselves now for several months, and you know, the honest answer is we’re not sure," Kamai said. "We know that there are certain things that draw folks from this part of our community to the area – the library, the public restrooms downtown, and we’re not really sure how that’s going to affect things once they (the library) move.”

A faith-based ministry once operated a day center for the homeless which offered a warm, dry and sober option during the hours the Brother Francis Shelter was closed. After The Living Room, as it was called, closed, another center operated briefly near Saint James the Fisherman church on Thorsheim Street. Chief Kamai misses that option.

“I felt then and I do now – I sure miss those folks – that it was really helpful and it really address this issue. It kind of filled that gap that’s missing now. I haven’t heard if there’s someone else or another group looking at starting something like that, but I think it would be fantastic if there was.”

Kamai says he’s aware that there are some people in Kodiak who would like the police to just round up all vagrants and usher them away from downtown, but he says his patrol officers are trained to respect everyone’s constitutional rights, whether they’re chronically homeless or upstanding citizens.