

A Strategic Framework for Sanctioned Encampments in Bangor, Maine: Evidence, Models, and Operational Best Practices for Crisis Response

Executive Summary: The Imperative for a Managed Transitional Environment

The City of Bangor faces a confluence of urgent challenges that render the current status quo of homelessness response untenable. The presence of a significant, high-risk encampment on railroad property creates immediate liability and life-safety hazards that cannot be ignored. Simultaneously, the region is bracing for a severe destabilization of the housing continuum due to projected federal shifts in the Housing Choice Voucher program, which threatens to displace hundreds of currently housed individuals into a system that is already at capacity. These factors, compounded by the inefficiency of the "warming center shuffle"—where individuals are forced to vacate overnight shelters daily, hindering stability and case management—demand a paradigm shift in how the municipality manages unsheltered homelessness.

This report proposes the establishment of a **Sanctioned, Managed Encampment** (distinct from "safe zones" or unmanaged camping) as a critical, stop-gap infrastructure. While the "Housing First" philosophy remains the ultimate objective for resolving homelessness, the immediate lack of housing stock in Bangor necessitates a "Treatment First" or "Stabilization First" interim step. This report provides the evidentiary basis to refute the assertion that "sanctioned encampments don't work." By analyzing data from Denver, Colorado; Missoula, Montana; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and other jurisdictions, this analysis demonstrates that when implemented with specific operational fidelities—such as hard-sided structures, 24/7 management, and integrated services—sanctioned encampments significantly outperform unsanctioned street homelessness in metrics of public safety, crime reduction, and successful housing transitions.

The following comprehensive analysis is designed to equip city leadership and stakeholders with a robust bibliography of research, excerpted case studies, and a blueprint for implementation that specifically addresses the harsh climatic and operational realities of Bangor. It argues that a managed village is not a retreat from the goal of permanent housing, but a necessary bridge to reach it.

Section 1: The Crisis Context and the Necessity of Interim Interventions

1.1 The Lethality of Railroad Encampments

The existence of the encampment on active railroad property in Bangor represents a profound and unmitigated public safety crisis. Railroad rights-of-way are active industrial zones where the margin for error is non-existent. The continued presence of vulnerable individuals in this location makes injury or death a near certainty.

Lethality is Imminent:

The danger escalates to an extreme level in the harsh Maine winter. Railroad operations require significant snow removal. The mechanical plowing of snow along the tracks will create long, high drifts and berms. These snow walls effectively trap residents within the right-of-way, dramatically reducing visibility and making the area impassable for first responders. An individual seeking shelter in these areas risks being buried, succumbing to exposure, or being struck by freight trains, which require significant stopping distances. The legal and humanitarian implications of allowing this lethal situation to persist cannot be overstated.

1.2 The "Voucher Cliff": A Federal Destabilization Event

A primary driver for the urgency of this proposal is the impending "Voucher Cliff." Recent federal policy directives from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) indicate a strategic pivot away from the "Housing First" Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) model toward short-term, treatment-mandated transitional assistance.⁴ This policy shift threatens to cap or reduce funding for existing vouchers, potentially destabilizing the housing

status of approximately 1,200 Maine residents.⁵

The implications for Bangor are severe. Local service providers estimate that upwards of 300 individuals in the city could lose their housing stability in the spring of 2025 due to these changes.

- **Loss of PSH Funding:** If federal cuts are applied uniformly, Maine could see a 68% to 75% reduction in resources for permanent supportive housing beds.⁶
- **The Displacement Effect:** Individuals currently stabilized in apartments via these vouchers may be evicted if the subsidies evaporate. These are often individuals with high acuity—mental health diagnoses, chronic medical conditions, or substance use disorders—who are ill-equipped to return to street homelessness.
- **System Saturation:** The Bangor Area Homeless Shelter and Hope House are already operating at or near capacity. They cannot absorb a sudden influx of 300 newly displaced individuals.

A sanctioned encampment serves as a scalable "surge valve" for this crisis. It offers a managed location where displaced individuals can be stabilized immediately, preventing them from disappearing into the woods or downtown doorways. It preserves their connection to case management, which is essential for reapplying for alternative funding streams or housing placements.

1.3 The Failure of the "Warming Center Shuffle"

The current operational model for overflow shelter—the "Warming Center Shuffle"—is fundamentally flawed as a stabilization strategy. This model typically provides shelter only from evening to morning, forcing individuals to vacate the premises daily with all their belongings.

Operational Inefficiencies:

- **Psychological Toll:** The daily requirement to pack up, move, and loiter in public spaces creates a state of perpetual "fight or flight" anxiety, which degrades mental health and increases substance use as a coping mechanism.
- **Barrier to Employment and Services:** It is nearly impossible for an individual to maintain employment or attend daytime appointments (medical, court, housing application) when they are burdened with carrying their entire life's possessions or worrying about their theft.
- **Case Management Disconnect:** Outreach workers spend inordinate amounts of time simply *locating* clients who are constantly moving.

Data from Missoula's Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS) confirms that providing a *fixed, 24/7 location* is a prerequisite for success. When residents have a secure place to leave their belongings and a consistent location where they can be found, engagement with services increases dramatically.⁷ A sanctioned encampment resolves the "shuffle" by providing a stable base of operations for the resident and the provider.

Section 2: Review of Literature and Precedents (The Evidence Base)

To address the skepticism that "sanctioned encampments don't work," it is necessary to examine the academic and operational literature. The assertion that they fail is often based on *unmanaged* camping zones ("Safe Zones" with no services), which indeed often devolve into chaos. However, the literature distinguishes sharply between "passive sanctioning" and "active management."

2.1 The Case Against and The Rebuttal

The Critique: Organizations like the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) have historically urged caution regarding sanctioned encampments. Their primary argument is economic: sanctioned camps are not cheap, and they divert finite resources away from the ultimate solution—permanent housing.⁸ They also argue that camps can substandardize living conditions, normalizing life in a tent rather than a home.

The Rebuttal: While valid in a resource-abundant environment, this critique fails in the context of immediate crisis where housing stock simply does not exist. The Cicero Institute argues that the "Housing First" model, while ideal, has failed to keep pace with the inflow of homelessness in West Coast cities due to high costs and slow construction timelines.⁹ They advocate for sanctioned camping as a "Safer Solution" that bridges the gap. **The data supports this:** keeping someone in a managed camp is significantly less expensive than the societal costs of leaving them on the street (emergency room visits, police interactions, jail days, and sanitation cleanups).¹⁰

2.2 Crime and Public Safety Analysis

A central fear of community stakeholders is that sanctioned encampments increase local crime. Empirical evidence from Denver contradicts this. The *Colorado Sun* analyzed crime data from the Denver Police Department regarding the city's Safe Outdoor Spaces (SOS).

Key Findings from Denver ¹¹:

- **Neighborhood Safety:** In the six neighborhoods that hosted SOS sites, crime reports *decreased* by 2.8% in 2021. This occurred while crime in the city of Denver as a whole *increased* by 14.3%.
- **Specific Crime Types:** Reports of theft and public disorder dropped in half of the neighborhoods hosting sites. Where they did rise, the increase was lower than the citywide average.
- **Internal Safety:** Within the camps themselves, police calls were rare and almost exclusively medical. No resident was charged with a crime while living in the SOS sites during the evaluation period.

Insight: This counter-intuitive finding suggests that sanctioned encampments act as "guardianship" nodes. By moving people out of chaotic, hidden spots (like alleys or railroad tracks) into a lit, staffed, and monitored facility, the disorderly conduct associated with survival homelessness is suppressed. The camp provides the stability that removes the *need* for survival crime (e.g., stealing to replace stolen bedding).

2.3 Housing Transition Efficacy

Does living in a camp prevent people from moving to housing? The data suggests the opposite—if the camp is managed correctly. Managed villages function as "pre-recovery" or "pre-housing" stabilization centers.

- **Missoula, MT:** The Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS) reported that approximately 50% of its residents moved on to permanent housing or other positive destinations (rehab, family reunification).¹²
- **Denver, CO:** In the first six months of the SOS program, 75 residents were transitioned to permanent housing. Outreach workers noted that the time required to house a chronic individual was drastically reduced because they were easily locatable and document-ready.¹¹
- **Austin, TX:** The Esperanza Community moved 296 people into stable housing in 2024 alone. Their model integrates income generation, allowing residents to save for deposits.¹³

These figures demonstrate that managed encampments can outperform traditional low-barrier shelters in housing exits, likely because they allow for the preservation of social

support networks (partners, pets, community) that are often severed in congregate shelter settings.

Section 3: In-Depth Case Studies of Success

To provide the specific examples requested, we examine four models that share characteristics relevant to Bangor: cold climates, challenging populations, and distinct governance structures.

3.1 Missoula, Montana: The Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS)

Relevance to Bangor: Missoula shares a northern climate, a rural-urban interface, and a lack of affordable housing.

Evolution: Missoula initially experimented with an "Authorized Camping Site" using tents. They quickly learned that tents were insufficient for winter conditions and transitioned to a managed site using hard-sided Pallet shelters.¹⁴

Operational Model:

- **Structure:** 30-40 hard-sided Pallet shelters with heating and insulation.
- **Management:** Operated by Hope Rescue Mission (a faith-based non-profit). Staff are on-site 24/7.
- **Governance:** A "behavior-based" low-barrier model. Residents are not required to be sober, but they must adhere to strict behavioral rules (no violence, no dealing).
- **Outcome:** The site achieved a **50% positive exit rate**. The transition to hard-sided shelters was crucial for life safety during Montana winters.¹⁴

Key Insight for Bangor: Tents may be a liability in winter. A "sanctioned encampment" in Maine must be winterized and/or utilize hard-sided micro-shelters to be viable.

3.2 Denver, Colorado: Safe Outdoor Spaces (SOS)

Relevance to Bangor: Addressing neighborhood opposition and crime concerns.

Operational Model:

- **Structure:** Fenced communities of ice-fishing style insulated tents (initially) and later Pallet shelters, located on church parking lots and city land.

- **Services:** Intensive on-site case management, daily meals, and hygiene trailers.
- **Governance:** Managed by the Colorado Village Collaborative.
- **Outcome:** As noted, significant crime reduction in surrounding neighborhoods. The program was so successful it was expanded and integrated into the Mayor's formal homelessness strategy.¹¹

Key Insight for Bangor: High-quality fencing and 24/7 staffing are the antidotes to community anxiety. The site must look and function like a facility, not a campground.

3.3 Las Cruces, New Mexico: Camp Hope

Relevance to Bangor: Integration with existing service providers.

Operational Model:

- **Structure:** A "Campus Model." The camp is located on the property of the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, which also houses a soup kitchen, day shelter, and service agencies.
- **Governance:** Self-governing within strict boundaries. Residents elect leadership but are ultimately accountable to the non-profit host.
- **Outcome:** Functional zero for veteran homelessness was achieved partly due to this resource. The proximity to services (50 yards away) removed transportation barriers.¹⁶

Key Insight for Bangor: If possible, siting the encampment adjacent to an existing provider (if space permitted) creates immediate efficiencies in service delivery.

3.4 Portland, Oregon: Dignity Village

Relevance to Bangor: Long-term sustainability and governance.

Operational Model:

- **Structure:** The longest-running sanctioned encampment in the US (founded 2000). It operates as a self-contained village with tiny homes built by residents.
- **Governance:** Radical democratic self-governance. Residents pay "rent" (dues) and vote on rules.
- **Outcome:** Operation costs are incredibly low compared to city shelters. It provides a sense of ownership and community that prevents returns to the street.¹⁸

Key Insight for Bangor: While full self-governance may be too ambitious for a start-up emergency camp, incorporating resident councils can reduce staffing costs and improve rule compliance.

Section 4: Strategic Proposal for the City of Bangor

Based on the evidence, the following operational framework is proposed. This is not merely a "camping area" but a **Managed Micro-Community**.

4.1 Infrastructure and Winterization

The "sanctioned encampment" must be engineered for Maine winters.

- **Shelter Units:** Utilize 64 sq. ft. insulated panel shelters (e.g., Pallet Shelters). These units are distinct from sheds; they are engineered for human habitation with fire-rated materials and smooth, cleanable surfaces.²⁰
- **Heating Specifications:** Units must be equipped with 4500-watt heaters and a "cold weather package" (floor insulation, foam core walls) capable of maintaining 70°F interiors even in sub-zero conditions, as proven in Burlington, VT.²¹
- **Snow Load:** Shelters must be rated for at least 25-50 lbs/sq. ft. snow load to ensure safety during nor'easters.²²
- **Hygiene:** Portable toilets are insufficient and freeze. The site requires a heated trailer with flush toilets and showers to prevent the spread of communicable diseases like Hepatitis A and Shigella, which plague unsanctioned camps.²³

4.2 Governance and Rules of Operation

To address concerns about failure, the governance model must be rigorous. The best proposal here would likely be a **Managed Low-Barrier Model** similar to Missoula's TSOS, rather than a laissez-faire "Safe Zone."

The Code of Conduct (Excerpted from Successful Models):

Residents must sign a participation agreement. Violation results in expulsion.

1. **Violence:** Violence, threats, or weapons possession within the perimeter are prohibited.²⁴
2. **Substances:** While sobriety is not a condition for entry (keeping the barrier low), **public use** of drugs or alcohol in common areas is prohibited. Usage is confined to private living space. This "harm reduction" approach keeps the site orderly while acknowledging the reality of addiction.²⁴
3. **Theft:** Zero tolerance for theft from neighbors or the facility.²⁴

4. **Contribution:** Residents are expected to contribute to site maintenance (snow removal, trash pickup) to foster ownership.
5. **Quiet Hours:** Enforced quiet hours (e.g., 10 PM - 7 AM) to ensure the site remains a good neighbor.²⁵

4.3 Management and Staffing

- **Operator:** The site should not be city-run. It requires a non-profit operator with experience in trauma-informed care. A separate entity or coalition of organizations could be formed.
- **Staffing Levels:** Ideally 24/7 staffing. At minimum, 24/7 *presence* (e.g., security overnight, case management during the day).
- **Entry Control:** The site must be fenced with a single point of entry. Only registered residents and staff may enter. This prevents the site from becoming a marketplace for drug dealers or a hangout for non-residents, a common cause of failure in unmanaged camps.²⁶

4.4 Service Integration: The "Housing Surge"

The camp is a means to an end. The primary activity on-site must be **Housing Navigation**.

- **ID Recovery:** The stability of the camp allows residents to keep documents safe. Immediate focus on recovering Birth Certificates and Social Security cards.
- **Voucher Preparation:** With the federal landscape changing, the camp serves as a "holding pattern" where residents can be prioritized for whatever vouchers remain or new state-level resources.
- **Co-Location:** Bringing medical vans, addiction counseling, and housing applications to the site prevents the attrition that happens when clients have to travel across town.

4.5 Financial Feasibility and Cost Offset

While establishing a managed camp incurs costs (site prep, unit purchase, staffing), the comparative cost analysis strongly favors this intervention over the status quo.

- **Cost of Inaction:** The costs of "sweeping" railroad camps, police responses to

trespassing, Emergency Room visits for frostbite/exposure, and jail nights are exorbitant and recurring.

- **Comparative Cost:** Data from Portland suggests that while village models are more expensive than bare-bones mats on a floor (\$29k/yr vs \$16k/yr per bed), they are vastly more effective for the chronically homeless population that *refuses* mats on a floor.¹⁸ The cost per outcome (stable housing exit) is highly competitive.
- **Heating Efficiency:** Burlington's data indicates heating a pallet shelter costs approximately \$10/day in winter ²¹, a manageable operational expense compared to the medical costs of hypothermia.

Conclusion

The skepticism regarding sanctioned encampments is often rooted in the failure of *unmanaged* spaces. However, the data is clear: when a city commits to a **Managed Micro-Community** model—characterized by hard-sided infrastructure, behavior-based governance, and integrated services—the results are transformative.

For Bangor, this is not merely a humanitarian gesture; it is a strategic necessity.

1. It resolves the **Railroad Liability Crisis** by offering a legal alternative, allowing the city to enforce safety zones.
2. It buffers the **Voucher Cliff**, capturing the 300+ individuals at risk of displacement and preventing them from spiraling into untraceable street homelessness.
3. It offers an alternative to the **Warming Center Shuffle**, replacing chaotic churn with the stability required for rehabilitation.

By adopting the best practices from Missoula, Denver, and Burlington, Bangor can implement a solution that is dignified, safe, and effective—proving that sanctioned encampments, when done right, do indeed work.

Comparative Data Tables

Table 1: Housing Outcomes by Shelter Model

Metric	Unsanctioned	Congregate	Sanctioned
--------	--------------	------------	------------

	Encampments	Shelter	Managed Village
Housing Exit Rate	<5% (estimated)	15-20%	26-50% ⁹
Barrier to Entry	None	High (Sobriety/Curfew)	Low (Behavior-Based)
Partner/Pet Retention	High	Low	High
Daily Stability	Low (Risk of sweeps)	Low (Day exit required)	High (24/7 access)
Public Safety Impact	Negative (High crime risk)	Neutral	Positive (Guardianship effect) ¹¹

Table 2: Example Operational Specifications for Cold Climate (Bangor)

Feature	Requirement	Purpose	Source
Shelter Type	Insulated Panel (SIP) / Pallet	Thermal retention, fire safety	²¹
Heating	4500 Watt Heater	Maintain 70°F in sub-zero temps	²⁰
Snow Load	25-50 lb/sq ft rating	Prevent collapse during storms	²²
Insulation	EPS Foam Core	Energy efficiency	²²
Hygiene	Heated Trailer w/ Flush Toilets	Prevent disease outbreaks	²³

Table 3: Crime Impact in Denver SOS Neighborhoods (2021)

Crime Category	Citywide Trend	SOS Neighborhood Trend	Source
Overall Crime	+14.3%	-2.8%	11
Violent Crime	+7.8%	+4.7% (Significantly lower growth)	11
Public Disorder	Increased	Decreased in 50% of sites	11
Calls for Service	N/A	Negligible (Mostly medical)	11

Works cited

1. San Jose homeless camps spark safety issues for railroad workers - San José Spotlight, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://sanjosespotlight.com/san-jose-homeless-camps-spark-issues-for-railroad-workers/>
2. City of Prince George can clear out Moccasin Flats, judge rules, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/local-news/city-of-prince-george-can-clear-out-moccasin-flats-judge-rules-11082848>
3. 4 years and 3 court cases later, City of Prince George wins case to shut down homeless camp | CBC News, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/prince-george-homeless-camp-judgement-1.7610290>
4. Federal government decimates funding to housing programs - Preble Street, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.preblestreet.org/2025/11/21/federal-government-decimates-funding-to-housing-programs/>
5. Governor Mills Calls on Trump Administration to Rescind New Directive That Will Increase Homelessness - Maine.gov, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/news/governor-mills-calls-trump-administration-rescind-new-directive-will-increase-homelessness>
6. Evidence Shows Permanent Supportive Housing Helps People Exit Homelessness. A Proposed Funding Change Would Cut Those Programs. | Urban Institute, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/evidence-shows-permanent-supportive-housing-helps-people-exit-homelessness-proposed>
7. Temporary Safe Outdoor Space | United Way of Missoula County, accessed

November 26, 2025,

<https://missoulaunitedway.org/temporary-safe-outdoor-space>

8. Position Statement on Sanctioned Encampments - National Coalition for the Homeless, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://nationalhomeless.org/sanctioned-encampment-policy/>
9. Sanctioned Camping: A Safer Solution | Cicero Institute
https://ciceroinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Brief_Sanctioned-Camping-Fall-2023.pdf
10. Evidence for Housing-Based Encampment Strategies | HUD Exchange, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Evidence-for-Housing-Based-Encampment-Strategies.pdf>
11. Denver worried crime would come with safe outdoor spaces. Data ..., accessed November 26, 2025, <https://coloradosun.com/2022/10/24/safe-outdoor-space/>
12. Temporary Safe Outdoor Space | Missoula County, MT, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.missoulacounty.gov/topics/temporary-safe-outdoor-space/>
13. Our Impact - The Other Ones Foundation, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://toofound.org/our-impact/>
14. Missoula County puts unhoused residents on solid ground, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://www.naco.org/news/missoula-county-puts-unhoused-residents-solid-ground>
15. Denver Basic Income Project - Homeless Policy Research Institute, accessed November 26, 2025,
https://hpri.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CHHR_DBIP_Report.pdf
16. TENT CITY, USA - National Homelessness Law Center, accessed November 26, 2025,
https://homelesslaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Tent_City_USA_2017.pdf
17. Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, accessed November 26, 2025,
<http://www.mvcommunityofhope.org/>
18. Full article: Cost comparison of congregate, motel, and village-type shelters for people experiencing homelessness - Taylor & Francis Online, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10530789.2025.2473756>
19. Cost Comparison of Congregate, Motel, and Village- Type Shelters for People Experiencing Homelessness | PDXScholar, accessed November 26, 2025,
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/context/hrac_pub/article/1053/viewcontent/Cost_comparison_of_congregate_motel_and_village_type_shelters_for_people_experiencing_homelessness_Julia_Stone.pdf
20. Pallet Product Catalog - Siskiyou County, accessed November 26, 2025,
https://www.siskiyoucounty.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/housing_resources/page/30850/rfp_palletshelteroperator_attachment_b_palletproductcatalog.pdf
21. Creating Safe and Durable Shelter to Withstand the Bitter Cold, accessed November 26, 2025,
https://palletshelter.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/11-120_CaseStudies-Burlin

[gton_ColdWeather_Final-1.pdf](#)

22. Pallet shelters can weather the elements - Pallet Shelter, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://palletshelter.com/blog/from-winter-to-summer-pallet-shelters-can-weather-the-conditions/>
23. Guideline & Recommendation #18-03 - King County, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://cdn.kingcounty.gov/-/media/king-county/depts/dph/documents/about-public-health/board-of-health/recommendations-guidelines/guideline-recommendation-18-03.pdf>
24. Governance – Dignity Village, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://dignityvillage.org/governance/>
25. CAMP HOPE – TEMPORARY SHELTER - Site Rules Agreement - wsdot, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://wsdot.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/CampHope-Update-RulesandGoodNeighborAgreement.pdf>
26. Case study Sacramento: When sanctioned encampments go wrong—lessons for SJ, accessed November 26, 2025,
<https://www.opportunitynowsv.org/blog/case-study-sacramento-when-sanctioned-encampments-go-wronglessons-for-sj>