

Under the viaduct at the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) Howard Street station, where Evanston and Chicago intersect like Tetris blocks, a homeless encampment arose in recent years, [reportedly](#) the city's "largest loitering area," according to public officials.

A 2023 photo shows shopping carts cordoning off an alcove where up to 20 people would congregate. Whether anyone slept there overnight was a matter of dispute.



A view of an encampment of unhoused people on the north side of Howard Street, below the CTA viaduct, in August 2023. Credit: Kathy Routliffe

Most were “not Evanston residents,” Health and Human Services Department Director Ike Ogbo told the City Council in a memo. Perhaps the sheltered spot’s jurisdictional ambiguity contributed to its allure, creating a pocket of benign neglect.

Regardless, a community had formed. According to [RoundTable reporting](#), “microwaves, coffee pots and other items” were seen plugged into a CTA outlet. A supply of Narcan (a brand name for naloxone, which is used to treat opioid overdoses) was on hand in case of emergency.

The site [vexed](#) Evanston City Council members, and from October 2023 to April 2024, a range of complaints and disturbances compelled 25 separate visits from the Evanston Police Department.

Given that people in such makeshift outdoor communities often deal with the [comorbidities](#) of substance abuse and mental illness — health challenges that only fester when ignored — several groups and individuals called for a compassionate and comprehensive response.

### **Tale of two cities**

Roughly half the storefronts in the immediate vicinity of the train station are vacant, available for lease. Those occupied offer conveniences like fast food, beauty care, currency exchange and cell service. Their front doors display various “no” signs: *no* public bathroom, *no* pets, *no* smoking and *no* shoes *no* service. And their limited in-store seating and the plexiglass dividers at the check-out

counters contrast with other business districts along the Purple Line.

Store clerks seem more anxious about robbery than vagrancy. One revealed a baseball bat perched behind her counter and said she had pepper spray, too.

A customer at [Bestow Vape and Smoke](#) said it wasn't the homeless population that caused nearby residents to lose sleep — it was the sound of gunfire.

### **Government intervention**

In March, Eighth Ward Council Member Devon Reid, who represents the area, argued that more affordable housing was necessary to get people like those communing under the train tracks off the street. But he and his colleagues balked at a \$500,000 appropriation to address housing-related concerns.

The city did, however, invest in security cameras to monitor activities under the station, [facilitate](#) local transitional housing opportunities, fund a mental health crisis center and launch the [Crisis Alternative Response Evanston \(C.A.R.E.\)](#) program, which in July began deploying four trained specialists to respond to low-risk 911 calls instead of police.



The area under the Howard Street station viaduct vexed Evanston City Council members as people were gathering there illegally. Credit: Matt Farrauto

Reid also [reportedly](#) “convened and organized meetings with City staff and multiple organizations, including Peer Services, Connections for the Homeless, the CTA, Chicago’s 49th Ward Alderman’s Office, and the City of Chicago Department of Family Support Services” to coordinate aid to individuals in the encampment. Reid did not respond to requests for comment from the RoundTable for this story.

Taken together, the city's efforts created a reasonably comprehensive or "holistic big-picture approach" like the one Fourth Ward Council Member Jonathan Nieuwsma said he was seeking.

### **Going, going, gone?**

Fast-forward to a chilly December afternoon, and the encampment was nowhere to be found.

An unattended bag nestled in a nook near an exit, and a police vehicle was parked nearby. Otherwise, the scene on this controversial patch of real estate felt relatively normal.

An employee at [P&J Footwear](#) on the Chicago side of Howard Street was unsure what had happened with the encampment but believed people still gathered in the tunnel after dark. Indeed, on subsequent evenings, groups of about a half dozen people could be seen huddling in an alcove.

Nonetheless, the absence of tents, carts, cardboard boxes and other temporary structures seemed newsworthy. Had our local government done something? If so, what?

### **Carrots and sticks**

Evanston native Jeron Dorsey serves as the city's deputy director of parks and recreation and as the C.A.R.E. program's team manager.

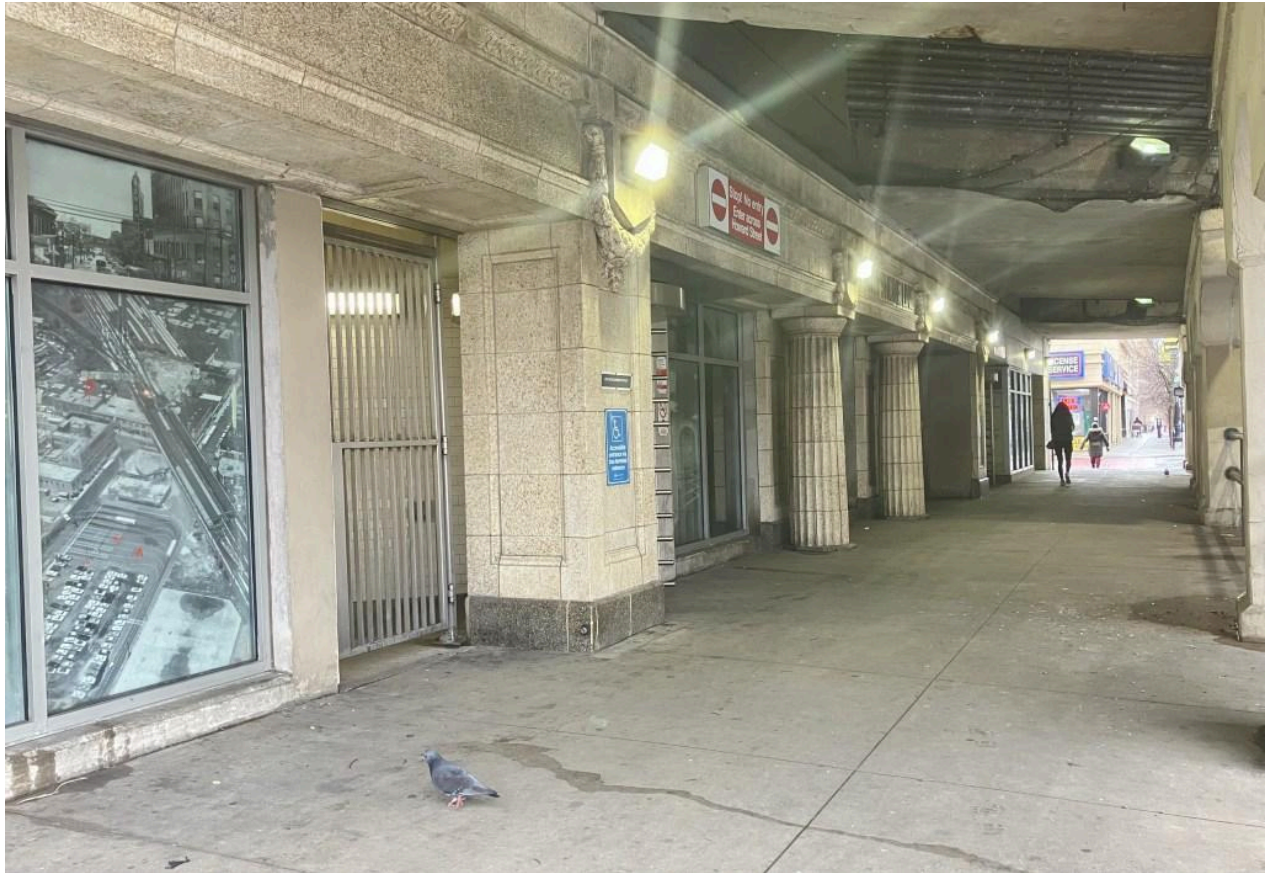
Yes, the encampment has disbanded, he confirmed to the RoundTable. And, no, it “did not happen overnight,” he added.

Dorsey credits the relationships that the city’s [Youth and Family Services Division](#) forged even before the C.A.R.E. Program’s launch in late July as arguably the “biggest” and “most important” factors in successfully disbanding the camp.

Those relationships, and the trust they established, helped officials steer individuals toward available substance abuse and mental health services like those offered by [Evanston’s “Living Room,”](#) a free walk-in clinic managed by Turning Point Behavioral Health Center and the Chicago-based [Trilogy](#).

C.A.R.E.’s crisis responders used more carrots than sticks, bringing “food, snacks, hygiene kits” and such, so the loiterers “knew that we weren’t coming to make their lives a living hell, we were actually coming to help them,” Dorsey said. Eventually, “they bought into it,” he added.

And whenever anyone attempted to resurrect the encampment or “circle around back into the alley,” Dorsey said it was the credibility the city built through continued engagement that helped his team communicate to people that gathering in the public right of way could carry criminal consequences.



On a late December afternoon, signs of an encampment under the Howard station were nowhere to be found. Credit: Matt Farrauto

Ultimately, it was “a huge group effort” involving an array of government entities, community groups, social service providers and law enforcement agencies, he said.

Based on Dorsey’s description of the city’s success in tackling the root cause of the issue, Evanston’s outreach strategy appears to be more collaborative than those implemented in other Illinois municipalities.

As a recent Chicago Tribune [report](#) highlighted, since the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the enforcement of “bans on people

sleeping outdoors,” the City of Peoria [made public camping a criminal offense](#).

Chicago, meanwhile, has used “[accelerated moving events](#)” to place people in housing expeditiously and “shut down tent cities” — an approach [criticized](#) by some homeless advocates as both “insufficient and potentially traumatic.”

Dorsey, on the other hand, did not want anyone to “feel like their rights are being violated or to feel like they are just being moved along without being provided resources.” As such, Evanston’s team communicated its intentions to its Chicago counterparts, ensuring everyone was “on the same page,” he noted.

#### **What next?**

“I wouldn’t say we solved the problem,” Dorsey cautioned, noting that many people in Evanston still experience homelessness and housing insecurity. “It is just not as much on the forefront as you would see in the past.”

Indeed, recently released [federal data](#) showed “a record-breaking rise in unhoused people” across the country fueled, in part, by “high rents, stagnant wages and a surge in migrants seeking asylum,” the New York Times [reported](#).

It also remains to be seen whether local, state and federal efforts to increase the supply of affordable housing will prove successful, and how a new presidential administration will impact the number of migrants new to the country coming to the Chicago area.