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For Miami-Dade sex offenders, wandering awaits

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STEVE JOHNSON / THE MIAMI HERALD

Homer Barkley, a sex offender who was moved from the Julia Tuttle Causeway into an apartment in February, holds a letter in his doorway informing him that his lease will be revoked on Wednesday, July 21, 2010.

Months after Miami-Dade County cleared out a camp of sex offenders living under the Julia Tuttle Causeway, some of the former squatters are once again homeless, and many of the others are on the verge of being out on the streets again.

Most are unemployed and unable to continue to pay the rent once the money that officials kicked in so they could find housing runs out.

The inevitable result, some say, is that a sex-offender camp could emerge in a new location any day now.

“If they can't afford rent, we may be back to square one,” said Jill Levenson, a professor at Lynn University in Boca Raton who is studying the impact of residency restrictions.

“The problem with this solution it was only temporary, a

band-aid.”

The old bridge dwellers are now crammed into a few neighborhoods because of residency restrictions designed to keep them 2,500 feet away from where children gather.

When the Tuttle camp was torn down, officials promised to find housing for the 92 men and women and to pay six months' rent -- a \$1 million project. Now that time's almost up.

A handful of the former causeway residents who were under state supervision on Jan. 1 already have no stable address. On Sunday, another 17 will see their leases end. By November, leases will end for all the rest.

“It feels like moving us from that bridge was just a publicity stunt,” said Homer Barkley, 44, who served time after pleading guilty to sexually assaulting a 10-year-old girl. His six-month lease will expire Sunday. “How do they expect me to find a place to live? I'm not a millionaire.”

With corrections data estimating an additional 100 sex offenders who were arrested in Miami-Dade will be released each year, the plight of the former Tuttle residents is a microcosm of a problem no one knows how to fix.

Lost in a labyrinth of local residency restrictions, the offenders established a plywood-and-tent city under and around the causeway. The site became an international embarrassment, leading to lawsuits and political finger-pointing.

After three years, officials put up “No Trespassing” signs under the Tuttle and tore down rickety wooden

shanties. They gave studios to men like Barkley, who had spent three years living under the bridge.

NEW HOME

At \$590 a month, the small studio in Shorecrest isn't much. The fridge and the cabinets were empty and he used bedsheets for curtains. He's still looking for a job.

Levenson, the professor, noted there are great risks in keeping sex offenders in squalor. Research has identified which factors might compel a criminal, such as a sex offender, to reoffend. The three biggest are lack of social support, unemployment and housing instability.

For years, Levenson argued with Homeless Trust Chairman Ron Book that the residency restrictions only aggravate those factors. It was Book, after all, who successfully lobbied to extend the 1,000-foot state law to 2,500 feet in Miami-Dade.

Yet for all their disagreements, Book and Levenson agree on what the future looks like for the group.

"I have deep concerns that these people, who have somehow assumed we are a welfare agency and that we have deep pockets, are going to end up back somewhere on the streets," Book said. "We just don't know where."

Book is against any more assistance for the group, adamant that their dilemma has less to do with residency restrictions than with their inability to find jobs so they can pay their bills.

"As far as we're concerned, our help for people under the bridge is done," Book said.

A year ago, as many as 140 people lived under the bridge, including a number of homeless men and women who weren't sexual offenders. Lawsuits flew, and as the cases wore on, Homeless Trust Executive Director David Raymond decided to take action. Part of the trust's mission is to clear up homeless encampments.

In October, the trust awarded an \$818,800 contract to Tampa-based Lutheran Services of Florida, which identified available housing, offered employment assistance and agreed to pay rent and utilities. The staff paid landlords directly, so the Tuttle residents never touched the money.

By March 2010, the entrance to the old camp was sealed off and the nonprofit located housing for 92.

Within a month, more than 20 were thrown out of their new place.

One of the offenders -- Yat Wan Chang -- was arrested on new charges of lewd and lascivious conduct on a minor. The incident allegedly happened at a shopping center blocks away from the Homestead hotel where he and at least 20 more sex offenders lived. Evictions soon followed.

Incensed, Book said he didn't want sex offenders clumped together. But that proved impossible. A Miami Herald review of state records shows the effort to relocate them created at least two small clusters.

Thirteen offenders were moved to the River Park Trailer Court in Allapattah, a collection of mobile homes and unpaved streets overrun by dogs. Another 13 were moved into a secluded part of Shorecrest, an Upper East Side neighborhood residents call "our little paradise."

In Shorecrest, some moms and dads told their kids couldn't play outside anymore. One resident installed cameras.

“Everyone's a lot more alert about what's happening around them,” said teacher Rachel Hamm, 48. “I haven't seen anything suspicious, but I'm still worried because I have two teenagers.”

When more than 100 Shorecrest residents demanded a meeting with Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado, their county commissioner and the Homeless Trust, they learned there was little that could be done.

“I wish I had a magic wand and could make them go away, but I don't,” Book said. “I don't see a resolution to this.”

Compared to life under the bridge, Homer Barkley's small studio in Shorecrest does seem like paradise. He now has an actual mattress, indoor plumbing and a roof.

He gets along with his neighbors: Five former Tuttle residents live a five-minute walk away. Two more occupy an apartment down the street. Another two live a block west.

In Barkley's two-story building, overrun by shrubs and feral cats, there are eight studios. Old Tuttle residents live in apartments 1, 2, 4 and 5.

When Barkley received a 30-day notice in July that he had to start paying his own rent, it renewed fears of the life he left.

His family has cut him off, so he can't get help there. He'd consider moving in with his current girlfriend, but the 2,500-foot restriction puts her neighborhood off limits.

THE PROCESS

When their leases expire, the sex offenders are expected to go through the county's existing process to aid homeless people. In Miami-Dade, those services are offered through the Homeless Trust, the same agency that gave the Tuttle dwellers the leases.

But more help is unlikely. To get trust help, a person must move to a local homeless shelter. That's impossible for a sex offender because all the shelters are in restricted neighborhoods, trust director Raymond said.

Ideally, the trust wants to set up a database of homeless sex offenders that the agency and the state Department of Corrections can use to track them and maybe help them find housing. But corrections officials think setting up such a database is too costly and bureaucratic.

Typically, release officers meet with convicts six months before they leave prison. Contact people who love you, they tell the convicts. Ask if they can find you housing.

Sex offenders are harder, though, because they're often cut off by family or friends, Florida DOC spokeswoman Gretl Plessinger said. So the state gives them \$100 and a bus ticket to the county where the convict was arrested. The release officer also shows them a map of places they are allowed to sleep.

“If it's a parking lot or a street corner or a wooded area, we have to make sure they stay there,” Plessinger said.

A man who calls himself Rashid Wali chose a street corner in Shorecrest. Of all the neighborhoods, this seemed the nicest. It is also steps away from another bridge to Miami Beach, the John F. Kennedy Causeway.

Late one recent night, he settled with a beer outside a closed auto-repair shop and plugged his cellphone

into an exterior outlet.

“Still couldn't find a job today,” he sighed, “because I don't have an ID. The DMV won't give me a license that says transient.”

“We're damned,” interjected Patrick Weise, a shirtless 49-year-old grasping a Miller High Life. Weise was one of the first sex offenders to move under the causeway. At the Tuttle, he was in charge of collecting money for the generator that gave everyone electricity.

After the expulsion, Weise spent days in the Homestead hotel. After he was evicted from there, he spent a month living in a field. Now, he also sleeps on the corner.

At a little past 10 p.m., the state curfew for registered sex offenders, another sex offender joined them. That night, the three slept on the sidewalk.

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