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Your Travel Guide to Occupy San Francisco

By Kristi Gutknecht

The Occupy San Francisco camp at Justin Herman Plaza is approximately the length and breadth of one city block. It is composed of three long, cement risers along Embarcadero St., two stretches of bocce ball courts with a lawn between them, and another block tier along Stuart St.



Many non-camping supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement have posted questions on Twitter asking about life in the camp. How does it work? Are there leaders? What do campers *do*? Where do they . . . ? In my experience the camp was well-run, as organized as an office building -- and had no running water.

When you enter from Market St., you are greeted by a display of artwork and a welcoming committee as friendly as park rangers. The lower tiers and north-east bocce court is the "living room," where meetings are held. At the highest tier facing Embarcadero St. are the tarped enclosures, strung up by the palm trees -- think *Swiss Family Robinson* -- including the medical tent. Most notable are the tents for the infirmed homeless who came to camp seeking safety and respite in numbers.

Every night, a camp wide meeting called General Assembly is attended by at least 50 interested protestors. When a proposition is put before the group, it is debated upon until 100% consensus is reached.



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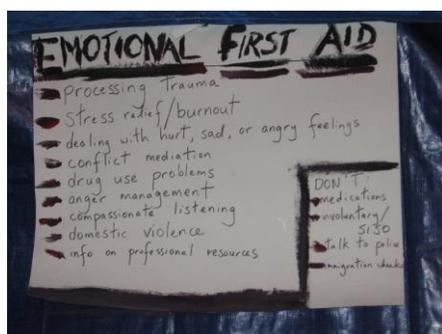
At the kitchen tent, hot meals are served twice daily, but snacks are handed out if one asks nicely. The kitchen tent is run by responsible camp volunteers who enforce health codes. "The health department is watching us," as one kitchen volunteer said. That means no grabbing serving spoons or unwrapped food without latex gloves. Handi-wipes and hand sanitizer are liberally dispensed. Water is also available, and the only supplies lacking are picnic-ware. Many campers seem opposed to using disposable plates and flatware, because of the anti-green

Food, water, art supplies, and car batteries are daily donation requests. The art tent is across from the kitchen where campers create the signs you see on the news. When I sit with the artists, I'm reminded of sleep-away camp as a kid -- that's the last time my artistic side was so encouraged despite a total lack of ability. Campers' enthusiasm and hope that they can make a difference comes out in the messages they draw in found supplies like Sharpie, paint, and Hi-Liter.



Car batteries are prized by the Communications Committee because they are rigged to power the webcam and the laptops engineer the website, which connects Occupy San Francisco to other camps and the world. The Communications Committee gets involved in a little of everything -- watching for police raids, procuring food and medicine, engineering methods to bring electricity and sanitation to the camp. They feel very stressed and underappreciated, much like the IT department at any medium-to-large company. It seems the work exceeds the workers, who don't have enough hours in the day between their regular jobs and Occupy.

As for the million dollar question: bathroom facilities. There is no running water at camp. Many campers have use of friends' apartments, and San Francisco has a few free shower facilities for the homeless. Camper Roger* says campers sometimes "get some money together and rent a room." I never considered, when homeless people ask for a dollar in the cup, I could be funding a communal hotel room. Roger speaks of the luxury of sleeping indoors, with climate control, clean sheets, and television.



One admirable aspect I've noticed in camp is the extreme delicacy of human interaction. Roger said that homeless campers use the barter system to negotiate "everything." Living in camp requires consideration of others, respect, confidence in one's own abilities, ingenuity, initiative, independence, and -- as campers reiterate at every opportunity -- love for one's fellows. The Occupy San Francisco camp is a delicate balance of human interaction and practical consideration.