

Sunday STAR Opinion

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The Star

Opinion Page Editor:

EDITORIALS

Ventura jumps gun on arrests

Wrongful citations are serious

It is no small matter that the city of Ventura has been wrongfully citing people, resulting in some being arrested and jailed.

As Star reporter Kevin Clerici reported last week, 49 misdemeanor citations were issued to homeless people for illegally camping or storing property in public between June 1 and early September.

That, despite the fact that illegal camping is currently an infraction, not a misdemeanor, except when one is camping in a Ventura riverbed or flood plain.

Illegal camping anywhere in Ventura will become a misdemeanor come Jan. 16, as voted on by the City Council in October. But, right now, it's still an infraction; and it was an infraction when at least 49 misdemeanor citations were incorrectly issued to homeless people, between June 1 and early September.

The difference between an infraction and a misdemeanor is major in that the former is punishable by tickets and fines — unless the person has multiple prior violations; the latter can result in the offender being arrested and jailed.

If such a mistake had been made affecting any other group than homeless people, we think the redress would be greater than an internal review of how the mistake was made, with a promised City Council report down the road. City officials defend the jailing of some of those incorrectly cited because they did not appear for their scheduled court dates. That, however, does not excuse the fact people were wrongly cited to begin with.

How many other people are being arrested and jailed because police are not clear about the laws they are enforcing?

Mr. Clerici reported that the city attorney and a police lieutenant discussed the problem Aug. 4, but misdemeanors continued to be processed by the city attorney's office after that date. Why?

Why was it up to the Public Defender's Office to blow the whistle on this mistake, when the city attorney's office and police knew about the problem earlier?

Deputy Public Defender Jay Leiderman told Mr. Clerici earlier this month: "The city has been going around wrongfully incarcerating homeless people. The Public Defender's Office finds this behavior outrageous."

So should we all.

Why was it up to the Public Defender's Office to blow the whistle on this mistake, when the city attorney's office and police knew about the problem earlier?

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