

Bah Humbug! Anti-Homeless Laws Taint the Season

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.—As the song goes, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” a time when giving becomes the priority and hearts turn toward the needy.

But in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a Scrooge of a law has led to protests and national attention, and the man in the middle is 90-year-old Arnold Abbott, lovingly referred to as “Santa Claus.”

The World War II veteran made headlines when police ticketed him not once, not twice—but four times for violating the city’s public feeding ordinance.

‘Sir, Drop that Plate’

“I felt something on my arm—it was a hand and the officer said, ‘Drop that plate’ as though I had a weapon in my hand. It was kind of funny,” Abbott recalled with a chuckle.

Video of Abbott defying the new law went viral and led to a national outcry. A judge has since placed a temporary suspension on the law until further mediation from both sides.

When CBN News spoke with Abbott, he was preparing to hit the streets again with a fresh batch of meals.

“We don’t serve the same food day after day. We serve different food. We want to make sure the food is delicious, nutritious and pretty,” Abbott explained.

He has spent the last 23 years feeding and educating the city’s homeless.

“It’s a mission of love. Love is in our name. Love is what we do,” he said.

Through a nonprofit called Love Thy Neighbor, he trains the homeless for jobs in the food business.

For Abbott, it's not only a heart of compassion that motivates him, it's honoring the legacy of his late wife who also dedicated her life to the poor. Each week he heads to the beach to feed hundreds.

Mayor: I'm Not the Bad Guy

But some say that public location has become a problem.

"It is set up to address an issue where we had some downtown parks being completely overwhelmed by these feedings," Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler explained to CBN News.

Seiler landed in hot water over the law but says he's not the bad guy.

"The park almost became off limits on days those feedings were taking place. Families were complaining to us. Children were complaining to us. People who wanted to visit the library were complaining to us," Seiler explained.

He wants to set the record straight and reiterates that groups are welcome to feed the homeless as long as they follow a few guidelines.

"No one passed any ordinance that restricted the homeless access anywhere downtown. All we said in terms of feeding going forward, ideally we'd like them indoors. We'd like them to have restrooms. We'd like them to have a kitchen or something, bathrooms available, clean water available. That would be the ideal situation to host these feedings," Seiler said.

Abbott and his supporters say those guidelines make it difficult for smaller charities. He also believes public places should be open to everyone, including homeless men, women and children.

"The beach has always been outdoors and everyone can enjoy the beauty of it. The only people excluded are the homeless," Abbott said.

Growing Anti-Homeless Sentiment?

Florida isn't the only state with "anti-homeless" laws on the books. They are actually popping up across the country.

According to a report from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, anti-homeless laws have passed in more than 180 cities across the United States since 2009.

Just a few hours north, Orlando restricts begging. In California, Santa Cruz bans sitting or lying down on public sidewalks.

Overseas, cities have installed what some believe are "anti-homeless benches and underpasses" to cut down on loitering and sleeping in public places.

As homeless populations grow, city leaders often find themselves torn between compassion and maintaining space for the general public.

To Abbott, laws like the one in Fort Lauderdale are un-American.

"I fought so many years for civil rights. I'm not gonna let this one go by," Abbott vowed.

The former civil rights activist says he's stared down the KKK and will take on the city and anyone else who comes between him and his religious duty.

"It is my right to feed my brother, to make sure that the hungry get fed," Abbott reaffirmed.

It's a fight he says he will continue until there is no longer breath in his body.