



152 Pearl Street  
Burlington, Vermont 05401  
**PHONE:** 802-862-5630  
**FAX:** 802-660-0473  
[www.uusociety.org](http://www.uusociety.org)

## First Unitarian Universalist Society

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We are writing on behalf of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, the church at the top of Church Street. As the Board of Trustees of the Society, we have heard concerns from a number of our neighbors about groups of people gathering at the entrance to our property on Pearl Street and on the property itself. Those concerns have focused on certain behaviors—sleeping, taking drugs, littering, etc.--as well as on the presence of many people gathered with their belongings, grocery carts, and suitcases.

We also are concerned with the behaviors that have been occurring in recent weeks, including needles and trash littering our property, people urinating and defecating in the gardens, shouting, and drug use. Like our neighbors, we do not condone this conduct and continue to take steps to try to end it.

For example, we have signs on the property prohibiting such conduct. During the hours that staff are present in the building, they clean up the property, ask people engaging in prohibited conduct to leave the property, issue trespass warnings and letters, and engage with the police. However, our staff is not large, and all of our staff members have multiple other duties that do not include managing individual behaviors by members of the public.

Additionally, as a faith community, one of our core values is to uphold the worth and dignity of every individual, even those who may currently be addicted to drugs or other substances. We welcome visitors who appreciate our property and who wish to attend our activities and strive to maintain a welcoming community. To us, this means that we must show our love for each individual while we are enforcing community behavior standards.

The current situation presents us with a huge challenge. While our staff interact daily with the police, we are not staffed all day every day or at night. This means that there are long periods when we do not have an individual present on our property who can contact the police or enforce our conduct rules during those times, and the police do not enforce trespass violations on private property without having either general no-trespassing signs posted according to state law or an authorized individual who can contact the police for individual incidents.

We have hoped to avoid posting no-trespassing signs throughout the property, as they seem inconsistent with our welcoming values. At the same time, we cannot afford to staff the property for 24 hours every day.

One of our concerns is that if we post no-trespassing signs and do not allow anyone to enter our property except on church business, where do the people gathering here go? This recent confluence of many individuals seems to be in direct response to certain actions by the city to

clear out a large waterfront encampment and people gathering in city parks. Closing those city spaces pushes people who have nowhere else to go to private property, and we are currently seeing the impact of those decisions.

While Vermont has drug treatment options available, the specific programs do not address the needs of all the individuals affected by our society's drug epidemic. Some individuals are not able or ready to undertake the challenges of recovery, and there are not sufficient low-barrier public programs or spaces that provide them with shelter or places to go during the day while they are still using. Our congregation has publicly supported the creation of an Overdose Prevention Center in downtown Burlington for this very purpose.

This does not mean that we are not concerned with the effect that these individuals are having on our neighbors and visitors. We call the police almost daily to move folks who are blocking our sidewalks and stairs (there is a sign on the front steps prohibiting sitting there) or engaging in illegal or disruptive behaviors. Our staff, and recently a dedicated corps of volunteer members, regularly clean up litter and ask people to move who are interfering with our operations or violating rules. We are working on finding the funding to hire security personnel to assist our staff in these efforts. We also are looking at ways to make portions of our property less attractive to gatherings.

We want to assure our neighbors, however, that we are working diligently to take the steps we can take and to do so thoughtfully and without just pushing the problem on to someone else to deal with. Like all of you, we also have not experienced anything this intense—the number of individuals gathering who are involved in drug-related or disruptive behaviors is far higher than we have seen in the past, and some of the behaviors are far more resistant to reasonable measures than we have seen.

We do not condone disruptive behaviors on our property. We do ask people to move when they are blocking the sidewalk. We do ask them to leave if a gathering gets too large. We do call the police when we find people using drugs or urinating in public. We do give people Notices of Trespass and call the police when they are violated.

We do not want to see our property closed up with no-trespassing signs or more fencing. We think most, if not all, agree. That would be a tragic moment in not only our congregation's story, but the story of Burlington. We are doing our part to find a way that honors a wide and responsible public use of our property while recognizing that this issue is societal in nature and larger than we can solve on our own.

Board of Trustees, First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington