

Free Florida's 'food terrorists'

How can it be a crime to hand out food to Orlando's hungry and homeless? What's criminal is the hunger and homelessness



Think of "food terrorism" and what do you see? Diabolical plots to taint items on grocery-store shelves?

If you are Buddy Dyer, the mayor of Orlando, Florida, you might be thinking of a group feeding the homeless and hungry in one of your city parks. That is what Dyer is widely quoted as calling the activists with the Orlando chapter of Food Not Bombs – "food terrorists". In the past few weeks, no less than 21 people have been arrested in Orlando, the home of Disney World, for handing out free food in a park.

Food Not Bombs is an international, grassroots organisation that fights hunger. As the name implies, it is against war. Its website homepage reads:

"Food Not Bombs shares free vegan and vegetarian meals with the hungry in over 1,000 cities around the world to protest war, poverty and the destruction of the environment. With over a billion people going hungry each day, how can we spend another dollar on war?"

The Orlando chapter sets up a meal distribution table every Monday morning and Wednesday evening in the city's Lake Eola Park. Lately, the Orlando police have been arresting those who serve food there, like Benjamin Markeson. He was perplexed, telling me:

"We think that it's terrorism to arrest people for trying to share food with poor and hungry people in the community to meet a community need. And all we do is we come to the park and we share food with poor and hungry people. I don't know how that qualifies as terrorism."

Attorney Shayan Elahi doesn't know, either. He is representing Orlando Food Not Bombs in court. He has filed for an injunction against the city in the ninth judicial circuit court of Florida, which is presided over by chief judge Belvin Perry Jr. Judge Perry is in the news lately as the no-nonsense judge in the Casey Anthony murder trial, which is happening now in Orlando. While the judge's courtroom receives blanket coverage on cable networks, Elahi hopes Perry will have time to personally rule on his filing.

At issue is a city law, the "Large Group Feeding" ordinance, which requires groups to obtain a permit to serve food, even for free, to groups of 25 or more. Such permits are granted to any group only twice per year. Orlando Food Not Bombs has already used both of its allowed permits this year.

The Florida Civil Rights Association has called on Mayor Dyer to apologise for his designation of the Food Not Bombs group as terrorists. The criminal act should not be feeding more than 25 people, but that more than 25 people need food. Attorney Elahi links the crackdown to the planned gentrification of downtown Orlando:

"The mayor started the development board for downtown Orlando, and his whole goal was basically to push everybody who ... didn't fit their idea of who should be in downtown. And we're trying to point out to the mayor that times have changed, that now everybody is hurting, and a lot more people who come to Food Not Bombs food sharing are working poor."

The core message of Food Not Bombs is embodied in a resolution passed just last week by the US conference of mayors calling on Washington to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as soon as strategically possible, redirecting funding to meet vital human needs here at home.

Central Florida has been hit very hard by the recession and is among the top locations for foreclosures and bankruptcies. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation is warning that global food prices are expected to remain high for the rest of the year and beyond. Earlier this year, food prices hit levels seen during the 2007-08 food crisis that sparked unrest in poor nations worldwide. Mass protests and a general strike in Greece against planned austerity measures are shutting down Athens.

One of the most famous songs at Disney World, not far from Lake Eola Park, is called "It's a Small World". Its refrain: "There's so much that we share/that it's time we're aware/it's a small world after all." Let's turn fantasy into reality. Sharing food should not be a crime.

• Denis Moynihan contributed research to this column

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Citing Homeless Law, Hackers Turn Sights on Orlando

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MIAMI — The hacker group Anonymous has declared a cyber-war against the City of Orlando, disabling Web sites for the city's leading redevelopment organization, the local Fraternal Order of Police and the mayor's re-election campaign.

Anonymous, a large yet loosely formed group of hackers that claimed responsibility for crashing the Web sites of MasterCard and the Church of Scientology, began attacking the Orlando-based Web sites earlier this week.

The group described its attacks as punishment for the city's recent practice of arresting members of Orlando Food Not Bombs, an antipoverty group that provides vegan and vegetarian meals twice a week to homeless people in one of the city's largest parks.

"Anonymous believes that people have the right to organize, that people have the right to give to the less fortunate and that people have the right to commit acts of kindness and compassion," the group's members said in a news release and video posted on YouTube on Thursday. "However, it appears the police and your lawmakers of Orlando do not."

A 2006 city ordinance requires organizations to obtain permits to feed groups of 25 people or more in downtown parks. The law was passed after numerous complaints by residents and businesses owners about the twice-weekly feedings in Lake Eola Park, city officials said. The law limits any group to no more than two permits per year per park.

Since June 1, the city police have arrested 25 Orlando Food Not Bombs volunteers without permits as they provided meals to large groups of homeless people in the park. One of those arrested last week on trespassing charges was Keith McHenry, a co-founder of the first Food Not Bombs chapter in 1980 in Cambridge, Mass. He remained in the Orange County Jail on Thursday awaiting a bond hearing.

This week Anonymous offered a "cease-fire" if no volunteers were arrested during Wednesday evening's feeding of the homeless. But the police arrested two volunteers, and on Thursday morning Anonymous disrupted the Web site Downtown Orlando, which promotes redevelopment there and is run by the city. An organization spokeswoman confirmed the attack but declined to comment, referring questions to the mayor's office.

A spokeswoman for Mayor Buddy Dyer, whose re-election campaign site was disabled on Tuesday, called the attack on the Downtown Orlando site an "inconvenience." She said the city would not change its policy of arresting volunteers who feed homeless people without a permit.



"We will continue to enforce the city ordinance," said the spokeswoman, who asked not to be identified out of a concern she would become a target of Anonymous. "We must continue to focus on what our Orlando residents want and not the desires of others from outside the community."

The attack on the Orlando Web sites was the second on a city or state government in two weeks. Last week, hackers gained access to the computer system of the Arizona Department of Public Safety and released law-enforcement records.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Orlando Police Department are investigating, officials said.

Members of Orlando Food Not Bombs condemned the cyberattacks. "We have absolutely nothing to do with Anonymous or any other group that is doing this kind of thing," said one member, Ben Markeson. "And what Anonymous is doing is a distraction from the real issue at hand."

Mr. Markeson said the Orlando mayor and City Council members had attempted to "criminalize poverty" by passing a series of ordinances intended to "hide the homeless."

"Mayor Dyer wants to hide the poor and the hungry people living in our community," he said.

The mayor's spokesman denied the allegation, saying: "Nothing could be further from the truth. The city has a strong relationship with our region's homeless providers and will continue to dedicate resources and services that assist our homeless population."

Anonymous has become known for prominent denial-of-service attacks on high-traffic Web sites. A denial-of-service attack takes place when an overwhelming crush of Web traffic is intentionally sent to a Web site until it is incapacitated and knocked off line.

Anonymous members rallied a call-to-arms against the city as part of a campaign it dubbed Operation Orlando. Its members promised that future arrests of volunteers helping the homeless would be met with fresh attacks. "For every arrested person," the group said on Twitter, "Anonymous will deface or assault TEN websites in Orlando."

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