

House Committee on Judiciary Chair Rep. Janelle Bynum

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The solution to homelessness is permanent housing. We must work together to ensure that truly affordable, accessible and adequate housing is available to all who need it. Such a solution to homelessness is not being implemented today. Instead, people who lack housing and must conduct survival activities in public spaces are being criminalized. Criminalization is violent, unjust, counterproductive, and creates barriers that prevent people from getting off the streets. By criminalizing homelessness instead of dealing with its root causes, local governments are forcing homeless people into hidden, and therefore less secure, areas--where the risk of being attacked is increased. Criminalizing homelessness instead of providing appropriate solutions sends the message that "homeless lives don't matter."

This bill does NOT give people the right to leave trash about, urinate in public, aggressively panhandle, block a doorway or passageway, or engage in destructive activities. This bill simply makes it legal for people to move freely, rest, sleep, protect themselves from the elements, eat and share food, and other basic acts necessary for human survival.

Homeless people have nowhere to go but public spaces, such as libraries, downtown areas, and parks. They have a right to use these spaces. The idea that homeless people should be barred entry to some public spaces is racist, classist and violent.

Citing homeless people for sleeping does not mean they will stop looking for a place to live, but criminal records create barriers to housing and employment. Criminalization of homelessness deepens poverty by creating legal barriers to exiting homelessness.

There are laws across the country criminalizing the act of simply sharing food in public. This bill will prevent laws like that from being passed in Oregon. In many cases, food-sharing programs may be the only occasion when homeless individuals have access to healthy, safe food. The need for food assistance is growing in our communities. We must ensure that those who wish to share food with those in need can do so in public spaces.

The Right to Rest Act protects the simple acts of resting or sharing food in public--acts of SURVIVAL. It does not mean people can sleep in doorways. This bill states clearly that people can "rest in public spaces and protect oneself from the elements, in a non-obstructive manner." Current laws prohibiting obstruction of a passageway would still be in effect. It doesn't mean people can be drunk in public, harass others, trespass or block passageways.

Homelessness exists in most geographic regions in the state. Though homelessness is more difficult to measure in rural communities, it does exist, and the barriers to escaping homelessness can be even more pronounced for rural residents. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 10 percent of homeless services clients live in rural areas, and 20 percent are in suburban areas. Homeless shelters are virtually nonexistent in rural communities and most health and social services accessible to homeless people are located in areas with larger and denser populations.

Please support HB 2367

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