

My name is Fiona Burgess, I am a resident of Southwest Portland, and I cannot stress enough how badly we need to put a stop to the criminalization of homelessness in Oregon. Not only do I believe that the Right to Rest Act (HB 2367) to be the crucial first step in addressing our housing crisis, I believe it is the first step to re-evaluating and reshaping our community's violent relationship with low- to no-income people.

The dominant culture in Portland has been one of treating homeless people like wild animals. When I was a child, trusted adults taught me to ignore homeless people and pretend they weren't there. Now we have a faction of affluent homeowners in Portland who are fighting for the privilege to pretend homeless people don't exist in their neighborhoods, and the City is enforcing this through violent sweeps. When most people hear the word "sweep", they might imagine someone simply being escorted somewhere else. I don't think enough people realize that Portland employs actual physical violence and theft of personal belongings to displace homeless people. The other day, someone who I will keep anonymous told me about how a member of the "cleanup team" assigned to sweep their camp had their friend unconscious in a sleeper hold, and when they tried to intervene they were hit in the ribs with the end of a rake. It was not the first time I had heard a story of this nature. Campers who have their belongings stolen in so-called "garbage collection" lose keys to maintaining stability and getting back on their feet: birth certificates, driver's licenses, job applications, wallets, and even life-saving medication. This is what led directly to the death of Debby Beavers (may she rest in peace), who had several medications stolen in a sweep by Rapid Response Bio Clean while she was recovering from a hip operation. One of these medications was insulin, which she needed for her diabetes. Workers from the very same company were the one to find her body and take it away to an undisclosed location, along with the rest of her and her husband's belongings.

HB 2367 will literally save lives by allowing homeless people to rest and survive in public places, just like the rest of us can. This is more important than ever now that more people are losing their homes due to a global health/economic crisis and our shelters are packed to the brim with already-vulnerable people desperately trying to avoid disease. If we're truly concerned with reducing the number of people sleeping outside, our municipalities should be allocating the money currently used for these deadly programs into accessible healthcare, daytime services and more affordable (or free!) housing options. We must also make room for proposals put forth by houseless people themselves, informed by their lived experience: many houseless people have pooled their resources with the help of concerned community members to build impressive self-sustaining tiny house communities such as Hazelnut Grove and Dignity Village. Some have found permanent homes and successful lives there, while others have used the stability that such communities provide to build resources to move into other housing. Both options deserve equal respect, and the only inconvenience these villages impose on the surrounding community is a minuscule amount of public spending on waste services (a pittance compared to other traditional homeless services) and a reminder that people with lower or no incomes exist in their community and are capable of making their own decisions.

All this bill will do at the end of the day is allow homeless people to exist in public and do strictly what they need to do for their survival without the looming threat of state-sanctioned violence. I believe that this action is the bare minimum, but it is a vital step nonetheless. I implore Representative Janelle Bynum and the Members of the committee to support this bill so we can continue working together on more humane solutions.