

Dear Legislators,

I am writing on behalf of a Portland grassroots organization, BerniePDX, in support of HB3115. Homeless people should not have their status criminalized. We urge you, on behalf of our thousands of members, to support this bill with a "do pass" recommendation. The COVID pandemic has uncovered the precarity of our jobs, access to healthcare and housing. It is past time to put an end to the criminalization of homelessness.

Right now, 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."

Data shows that homelessness is caused by the lack of affordable housing. Since 1996, there has been no federal government funding for new public housing, and homelessness has tripled or quadrupled in every major U.S. city and risen steadily since. Ironically, the criminalization of homelessness actually perpetuates homelessness by creating legal barriers to accessing housing and employment.

The way to reduce the number of people who are sleeping and living outside is not to criminalize their efforts to exist in public spaces, but rather to make appropriate day centers, healthcare services, meaningful employment, and especially housing available to those who need and want it. Efforts from homeless people to build self-determined housing and communities must also be respected and honored. Part of the reason we do not have adequate housing and services to meet the needs of homeless Oregonians is because municipalities have chosen to allocate these resources to law enforcement. If money spent on enforcement of anti-homeless laws (including policing, court processing costs, and incarceration), was instead spent on permanent affordable housing, we could end homelessness.

On Aug. 6, the Department of Justice wrote a statement of interest in the case of Janet F. Bell vs. the City of Boise declaring that when shelters are full, it's unconstitutional to prosecute homeless people for sleeping outside. Many people experiencing homelessness in Oregon have no access to shelters because some communities have no shelters, shelters are full, or shelters are unsafe for them for so many reasons (including systemic issues of racism, gender violence, sexual violence, ableism, homophobia and transphobia).

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.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.