

Jan Baker
Cape Elizabeth

Dear distinguished members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety,
My name is Jan Baker, and I am resident of Cape Elizabeth. I am urgently asking you to vote in support of LD 1478: An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness.

This critical legislation would ensure that homelessness is not criminalized and that trained mental health and substance use professionals would respond to encounters between law enforcement officers and people experiencing homelessness. Further, it would work to connect people with crisis services, emergency and transitional housing, and case management.

My son was a sophomore at the U of Michigan in 1988 when he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He came back home to get treated, but one day he disappeared, and I had no idea where he was. Months later, I got a call from someone at the State Mental Hospital in West Virginia to let me know he was there and was about to be committed. I learned that the local police had found him on a street corner and they took him to the hospital. It could've been worse but even then, I would not have known where he was except for the fact that someone who worked at the hospital broke the rules and called me. If there had been a mental health professional or case worker, my son would have gotten much better care. He survived, and thrived, but that was because I brought him back to Michigan where he was assigned a team of professionals to get him the treatment he needed.

The criminalization of homelessness reinforces the marginalized status of people experiencing homelessness, disconnects people from the services that they need, and further traumatizes individuals by involving them in our punitive criminal justice system. Criminalizing someone experiencing homelessness dehumanizes that person and places blame on the individual, rather than the larger systems that continue to fail people who are seeking help.

For these reasons, I am asking you to vote in support of this much needed bill so that people are met with empathy and the resources they deserve, rather than criminalization and incarceration.

Thank you for your time,
Jan Baker