

Chelsea Bartlett
South Portland

Dear distinguished members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety,

My name is Chelsea Bartlett, and I am a resident of South Portland. 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.

As someone who, pre-COVID, worked full-time in downtown Portland, I've come into contact with the homeless community there many times. It couldn't be clearer to me that these are just people who have fallen into extremely unfortunate circumstances. They should not be punished, but cared for. They should not be penalized, but given compassion, understanding, and support.

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.