

## **LD 1478 – An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness – Submitted Testimony – Jon Bass**

Hello,

My name is Jon and up until the pandemic, I've lived in the West Bayside neighborhood of Portland for 5 years. There are many reputations of this area stemming from homelessness—the drug use, violence, intoxication, “open air drug market”, constant chaos and beyond. You can probably sum it all up as the neighborhood that is home to 5% of the population, 1% of the city's landmass, and over 20% of the Portland Police's call for service.

As a community oriented, law abiding citizen, I am honestly surprised and concerned that we have to have a formal conversation about not breaking down the law in such a loose, vague way for a population, and its career predators, that needs it most. It is one thing when the “decriminalization of homelessness” is discussed around actions such as panhandling, but a completely different one when it involves legalizing activities that directly endangers the surrounding residents and communities, as well as empowers behaviors that harm the homeless themselves. On top of that, dismantling the organized and structured way of dealing with these issues, and essentially leaving what will become even more common and egregious issues at the doorstep of the less equipped police and law-abiding citizen is just as dangerous.

Living as part of this unique, 5% of Portland's population, I can safely assume that my daily life in that neighborhood (home to Portland's social services and shelters, and vulnerable, homeless populations) is likely just as unique, if not more, across the entire state of Maine. So, it may be difficult for most of Maine's legislature to imagine regularly cleaning human feces off your doorstep, or trying to stop an individual from urinating outside of your kitchen window, and sometimes deliberately exposing themselves to your loved ones. It may be tough to imagine having to watch four strides ahead of your dog so you can protect their paws from needles. It may be tough to imagine trying to exit your front door around a group of strangers drinking excessively at 7am. It also may be tough to imagine checking for someone's pulse because you aren't sure if the individual laying in your driveway is passed out, or if this time they will be dead. You may be unfamiliar finding drugs in your garden, or regularly watching someone give everything they have to possess it. You are likely also unfamiliar with the 24/7 fighting, yelling and screaming that comes with all of the above. What is tough for me to imagine and stomach is the impact this Act will have on this reality and the homeless and housed populations that it daily and so negatively affects.

I list the above not only to help you genuinely imagine this chaos in the streets of your towns, or even neighborhoods, and the toll it takes to live it every day, but to also help you imagine and feel the frustration that I, the law-abiding citizen, feels when my state is attempting to take away the ability to safely do anything about it and prevent it. And, as those resources diminish, the power of the predators that thrive on the vulnerable grows exponentially. Those who prey on our homeless community and many of the vices that keep them there are the only real winners of this Act. The losers are those who try to resist temptation and better their lives, and those law-abiding citizens who just want to live in the peace and safety that the law helps provide.

We do not live in a perfect system, but as Portland experiences firsthand, we live in one that evolves. Our police department has exemplified this year after year, especially on the front of how they collaborate with the neighborhood and the relationship they have with the homeless population. Our department, like many others, do not arbitrarily seize any opportunity to exercise the full extent of the law. They apply a homelessness protocol and work closely with service providers and train in crisis intervention and de-escalation. They also have a trained alternative responder, a substance use liaison, a mental health liaison, and a community policing coordinator with backgrounds in social services. Under its own leadership, policing in Portland and beyond understand the appropriate and effective application of law. When incidents escalate, and the well being of the victim, perpetrator and community are at risk, the police's ability to enforce the law is imperative.

As it stands, our neighborhood still has its constant challenges. But with those challenges, optimism remains, and progress ensues. However, granting immunity to the behaviors that only hurts the homeless and surrounding community, is pushing the progress significantly backwards. It allows predators to thrive, makes the homeless community more vulnerable, and leaves the law-abiding citizen resourceless and witness to it all.

Thank you all for your help and time.

Jon Bass  
Portland, ME

The below is copied and pasted from the attached Word doc, just in case...

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