

Andrew Bove
Portland

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Good morning Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and esteemed members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Andrew Bove and I am the Director of the Street Outreach Collaborative at Preble Street, a human services agency providing services statewide to empower people experiencing homelessness, hunger, and poverty. I am here today, on behalf of Preble Street, to voice our strong organizational support for LD 1478.

In my twelve years working with people experiencing homelessness, I have seen how the criminalization of homelessness has had detrimental effects on the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors. As the Director of the Street Outreach Collaborative, I work every day with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Most of these folks sleep outside, as well as pass their days outside. The public nature of their homelessness makes them vulnerable to laws that criminalize loitering, sleeping outside, urinating in public, drinking in public, and more. These laws unfairly target people without homes, who are unable to perform the basic activities of resting, sleeping, and using the bathroom in the privacy of their own homes, and instead endure an ongoing cycle of criminalization and trauma due to their high levels of contact with the criminal justice system.

In addition to doing street outreach to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the Street Outreach Collaborative also works to connect people with housing. In doing this work, we often run into issues when perspective landlords request a criminal background check. Many landlords get cold feet when they find that the people we work with have long criminal records. These records are full of non-violent charges associated with homelessness, namely the five things this bill seeks to decriminalize. Their criminal charges associated with just trying to survive while experiencing homelessness end up cutting them off from the housing they so critically need. Further, every time a person experiencing homelessness is jailed for a crime connected to their housing status, it cuts them off from the supportive services they have connected with, bringing them backwards on their journey, and further complicating their future.

Lastly, many of the clients that our Street Outreach Collaborative works with are people who are experiencing both homelessness and mental health and/or substance use disorders. The co-occurrence of homelessness, mental health disorders, and substance use disorders makes it incredibly difficult for these people to connect to housing other supportive services. We know that substance use disorder and mental illness call for responses rooted in public health expertise, not criminal law, however this reality does not exist. This critical legislation will bring us one step closer to that reality.

Tonight, many of us will go home and sleep comfortably in a bed. We will be free to sleep, change our clothing, use the toilet, or have a drink of alcohol in the privacy of our homes. These very activities done in public because an individual does not have a home, can be cause for arrest. This is not the case for our neighbors experiencing homelessness. Instead of privacy and comfort, individuals experiencing homelessness will be subjected to unnecessary charges and traumatic involvement with the criminal justice system. Experiencing homelessness and trying to survive should not be a crime. For this reason, Preble Street asks you to vote in support of LD 1478. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Andrew Bove