

Good morning Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Ben Martineau. I reside in South Portland and I am an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice. Homeless Voices for Justice is a grassroots organization based in Portland, ME, organized by people who have experienced homelessness, with the goal of creating positive policy change to end homelessness and poverty in Maine. I am here on behalf of Homeless Voices for Justice to testify in support of LD 1478: An Act to Decriminalize Homelessness.

Twice in my life I have swam through the sludge that can be homelessness. The first time with a girlfriend, the second time alone, living day to day until I emerged under a warm roof. Day to day...that's what it is like to a great amount of people without a home. While you sit at your kitchen table pondering over the steps you need to do to plan your brother's wedding that's two months away, some poor soul's praying somewhere along this chain of stores some employee is empathetic enough to allow them to do one of a human's basic functions, use the bathroom. While you shoo your child away from the bathroom door so you can do your business more peacefully, that person's trying to wash their face and hands so they can semi-feel halfway human before the management bangs on the door, demanding them to leave the premises. While trying to traverse this phase of life towards the goal of a warm roof overhead, the day-to-day basic features of living are right in there, in their face.

The most basic and for granted activities such as sitting down and taking a load off your feet, having a beer after a long, hard day's work, resting your face on a soft pillow on a most comfortable bed (thank god for the memory foam), can become the most difficult things to be done by those people experiencing homelessness who are dodging the routine law enforcement patrols.

The other day I was in downtown Portland doing errands in between transferring buses. My bladder decides to let me know it's full. Where can I go? NO WHERE!!! "Due to the rules set down during this pandemic, the use of restrooms is prohibited". I need to restrain and endure another half hour until my destination. Now what's a person without a home, without a destination supposed to do?

People with mental health and behavioral problems and/or substance use disorder have a disproportionate rate of police contact, leading to arrests and incarceration. With LD 1478 a person does not need to go to jail, to be put on a sex offender list because an officer catches a slight glimpse of them, attempting to squeeze up into a corner of an alley off the street to do a most needed body function, out of the corner of their eye. Trained mental health and/ or trained substance use disorder professionals will be called in to mediate the interaction. The person experiencing homelessness can also be referred to other provider services to help aid them to a better way of life. The importance of each of these points of the bill cannot be overstated.

I plead you to support LD 1478: An Act to Decriminalize Homelessness. Thank you for your time.