



Testimony of Whitney A. Parrish

**LD 1478 - Ought To Pass**

**An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness**

Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

May 14, 2021

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Whitney Parrish, and I am the Advocacy and Communications Director for Health Equity Alliance (HEAL). Health Equity Alliance is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public health and harm reduction organization that envisions and works toward a world where all people are valued and celebrated and where health justice is realized for everyone. Our organization serves many unhoused Mainers, and I am writing in **strong support** of LD 1478.

Open any news story on cities in Maine deciding to tear down encampments of unhoused residents or read any editorial about the “problem” of panhandling, and you do not need to go to the comments section to read the claims of potential harm that unsheltered Mainers allegedly pose. Those very same assertions are made by the reporters covering the stories. More disturbingly, they are being made by the public officials whose job it is to help vulnerable people without housing.

Health Equity Alliance’s largest office is in Bangor. We are incredibly grateful for our relationship and partnership with the city, and we recognize simultaneously that this narrative runs deep in our community. Just last month, we heard many of these same claims made at a City Council meeting where the issue of homelessness was raised and reported out on. Many public officials agreed that allowing unhoused people in Bangor to sleep in their tents posed a grave concern for the safety of Bangor’s other residents. And it was not just drug use that they claimed was a threat. The potential for “violence” and “sexual assault” and “vagrancy” was also part of that discussion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bangor City Council Workshop, April 12, 2021. Accessed at:  
[https://www.facebook.com/watch/live?v=294806538910554&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live?v=294806538910554&ref=watch_permalink)



Back in November, a Bangor city official went so far as to openly state that tents along the waterfront should be torn down so that the space could be enjoyed by the “everyday citizens in the community” (presumably Bangor’s unhoused citizens were not included in that group) without fear.<sup>2</sup>

We know Bangor is not unique here, and it is not our intention to single them out. We know you will hear about other municipalities as well. Many people and organizations in our area, just like in other Maine municipalities, have been working toward solutions with the city—though it seems few, if any, center on criminalization. We raise these meetings and statements because we believe they are important pieces of this discussion, no matter the municipality.

When you think of houselessness in the terms outlined here—when you read these things in your newspaper, see them on the TV, and hear your elected officials talking about unhoused folks in this way—it really does sound pretty scary. But that’s because it is supposed to. Whether we do so intentionally or not, stigmatizing unhoused people serves a purpose. Promoting a narrative that “these people” are violent, degenerate, and pose a threat allows us to see them as “others,” rather than as our neighbors and as residents and citizens.

And again, it may not always be intentional. We hear over and over that unhoused people “just don’t want what is offered to them” and perhaps “want” to be unhoused. The tough reality is that an encampment may be the safest option for someone, and yet we persist with stigmatizing narratives that inform critical policy decisions that can and do cause and compound harm and negative outcomes.

So, are unhoused people actually more dangerous than the general public? Are unhoused Mainers more likely to commit crimes? If we look solely at arrests for all crimes, you might think so. But there are two problems with this. First, people who do not have housing are, by definition, always in public, and therefore what they do and how they live is always under public scrutiny. For example, when a housed person has a bit too much to drink at night, they typically do so within the confines of their home. But people experiencing houselessness do not have that luxury, and that same act then becomes a visible “crime” of public intoxication.

Which brings us to the other problem with crime statistics: when you remove offenses that are specifically related to being unhoused from the equation—offenses such as public trespass for sleeping in a tent, panhandling, public urination when

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<sup>2</sup> Cortright, Courtney. ‘Bangor removes homeless encampments along Valley Avenue.’ WABI. November 10, 2020. <https://www.wabi.tv/2020/11/10/bangor-removes-homeless-encampments-along-valley-avenue/>. Accessed 14 May, 2021



folks have no access to toilets—then we see, in study after study, that **unhoused people do not pose any greater risk to communities than their housed counterparts**. In fact, what the research shows us is that coerced sheltering and criminalization of the act of being unhoused is not actually a pathway to greater safety and less crime in the community. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. When people are allowed to live in the ways that feel safest to them—and are not summonsed, fined, or jailed for being unhoused—then they commit fewer higher-level crimes such as break-ins and theft.<sup>3</sup>

LD 1478 provides a pathway to achieving this preferable outcome and start shifting the dangerous narratives about our unhoused neighbors. By decriminalizing what we have in the past considered public offenses, but which are really no more than victimless personal infractions, we will go a long way toward destigmatizing houselessness and creating opportunities for a more caring, more humanistic, and more compassionate approach to actually helping Maine’s unhoused citizens and residents—that work and stick. To that end, we respectfully urge you to vote *Ought To Pass* on LD 1478.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Fischer, S.N., Shinn, M., ShROUT, P. and Tsemberis, S. (2008), Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Criminal Activity: Examining Patterns Over Time. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42: 251-265 251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-008-9210-z>