

Elleena Petersen
Gray

Dear distinguished members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety,
My name is Elleena Petersen, and I am resident of Gray. 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 lead to a more inclusive community.

As someone who commutes back and forth to Cape Elizabeth for work and also when I worked primarily in Portland, I've noticed the increase in people sleeping in parks, behind buildings, and on main streets. These people need your help. I understand some people think unhoused people are a sore-sight. The sore thought for me happens when I look beyond the situation of this moment and I critically consider the steps that has put this person into a situation that is "unsightly" is being caused by a system that is not meant to care for them. Even with an undergraduate degree in Sociology I can see where the system is failing our community.

Our small town city of Portland can focus on building massive condos for out of staters to buy and never use, while turning a blind eye to a whole population of people who are freezing to death on the streets. Meanwhile this same system that has placed these people on the street is closing Preble Street during a crisis, which makes sense with the state of the world, but no one offered any solutions to the hundreds of people who spent a Maine winter outside in paper masks, terrified not only of a killer germ but also whether or not they'll wake up again if they fall asleep. There needs to be time spent finding ways to incorporate these unhoused people into our city planning. Add a handful of jobs regulated for first time offenders. Better yet pass this law so that people are no longer criminalized for part of a problem that has no solution being offered. Criminalized people cannot have jobs that can house them anywhere in this city close to jobseekers.

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,
Elleena Petersen