

November 25, 2024

Cranston City Council
869 Park Avenue
Cranston, RI 02910

VIA EMAIL

Dear Members of the Cranston City Council:

Last month, the undersigned organizations wrote to thank you for refusing to rubber-stamp Mayor Hopkins' rushed effort to enact an ordinance designed to crack down on homeless encampments. He then bypassed the Council with a problematic executive order on the subject. We now see that he is introducing tonight yet another proposed ordinance that once again focuses on the destruction of camps rather than meaningful assistance for the unhoused.

Although we realize that this proposal is on the agenda solely for the purpose of referring it to committee, we felt it important to go on the record sooner rather than later to denounce his latest attempt to punish individuals whose only true offense is lacking a home.

While this latest proposal, unlike his earlier one, does not appear to impose monetary fines on people who have no funds to pay them, its punitive impact cannot be ignored. It would authorize the police and the Department of Public Works to destroy camps and the personal property of those living in them after no more than 24 hours' notice. The proposed ordinance makes no pretense of requiring the preservation, for any period of time, of the few tangible pieces of property that may be in these temporary structures – including essential identification documents and the few worldly possessions these individuals may own.

The proposal makes a symbolic nod towards assisting these individuals with housing, but it goes no further than symbolism. It mentions “contacting and cooperating” with social services “in an effort” to provide temporary housing, but it offers no assurances that housing will be found before the destruction begins. It also refers to the issuance of a “no trespass” order if the individual “refuses to cooperate with any offered services.” The ordinance fails to explain what happens if no meaningful services are obtainable. And assuming that there are services – such as shelter space – available, it fails to acknowledge that in many instances, the unhoused person may either not be eligible for them or have good reasons to refuse them.

As much as the mayor and some other officials may wish to, the City simply cannot punish its way out of the severe housing crisis that this state is facing. In our letter last month, we mentioned the detailed report that the Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force on Housing and Homelessness issued on this topic. As we noted, that report can serve as a model for other communities, as it compassionately recognizes the needs of those who, often due to circumstances beyond their control, find themselves in this predicament, and steers away from ineffective efforts, like the mayor's, to ostracize or penalize them.

If and when this latest proposal is considered by committee or the Council, we urge its rejection and hope you will continue to recognize the need for a more empathetic response to this serious problem.

Sincerely,

Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project

Eric Hirsch

Better Lives Rhode Island

Paula Hudson

House of Hope CDC

Laura Jaworski

American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island

Steven Brown

Street Sights

Janice Luongo