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April 21, 2025

Woonsocket City Council
City Hall
169 Main Street
Woonsocket, RI 02895

VIA EMAIL

Dear Members of the Woonsocket City Council:

This letter is sent on behalf of the ACLU of Rhode Island and the R.I. Housing Advocacy Project. As organizations that advocate for the unhoused population in Rhode Island on a regular basis, and are therefore familiar with the many obstacles, hardships and discriminatory treatment that they face because of their homeless status, we write to express our deep concern and distress over the proposed anti-homeless ordinance that is scheduled for review and consideration at tonight's City Council meeting.

We understand that some Council members have expressed frustration that some encampments in the city have failed to take advantage of opportunities to address littering and related problems at those locations. However, we believe it would be a mistake to hastily respond to any such problems with a punitive ordinance like this rather than considering further, less confrontational steps to mitigate those problems.

In addition to making illegal any shelter on City-owned property, the proposed ordinance would impose a \$250 fine on second offenders and provide for the destruction of an individual's personal property after 72 hours. Adding insult to injury, this ordinance permits law enforcement to impound any personal property, likely requiring individuals to pay for its return – a cruel irony for those with extremely limited or no resources.

The purported 72-hour-notice to give individuals at least a modicum of time to make arrangements to relocate themselves and their property is less than meets the eye. Under the ordinance, police merely need to "*attempt* to provide any readily apparent owners" with that notice. Further, if an officer notifies an individual that their belongings will be removed and the individual objects, the ordinance allows the officer to immediately proceed with the removal regardless of the objection of the owner and their possible need for time to arrange for the relocation of their property. In any event, the ordinance goes on to release the city and its employees from any liability for the removal and disposal of property, regardless of whether these purported notice obligations have been complied with.

This ordinance also gives far too broad discretion to public safety officers to immediately dispose of personal property if they subjectively deem it "an immediate threat to health or safety of the public." Actions by law enforcement agencies in other communities have demonstrated that

a vague standard like this has led to the arbitrary and damaging destruction of important personal property of the unhoused.

We know that some municipalities across the country are seeking to take advantage of the U.S. Supreme Court's callous decision in 2024 in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* to punish the unhoused in a myriad of ways, but it would be unfortunate and disappointing to witness Woonsocket follow suit. This proposed ordinance is certainly a far cry from the tenor and recommendations of the October 2024 report issued by the Woonsocket Community Partnership Task Force on Housing & Homelessness, which correctly pointed out that camping bans are "ineffective and costly," and that called for *removing* legal penalties for being homeless.

In sum, forcing unhoused people to move when they have nowhere to go and engaging in the surreal attempt to fine them when, almost by definition, they have no money, are deeply harmful and completely ineffective responses to a serious societal problem. The proposal's further plan to quickly dispose of the little property these individuals have raises serious constitutional concerns independent of the *Grants Pass* ruling.

This ordinance seeks to address the state's homelessness crisis with punishment rather than with a compassionate recognition of the plight that hundreds of unhoused Rhode Islanders face. Our organizations urge the Council to reject this proposal, and to instead listen to community advocates and continue to work on more useful, compassionate, and systemic solutions to address this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Rhode Island Housing Advocacy Project
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American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island
Steven Brown - sbrown@riaclu.org

cc: The Hon. Christopher Beauchamp, Mayor
Margaux Morisseau, Human Services Director