

Feb, 22, 2016

Dear Jennie,

As a resident of Fort Collins and a member of the Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship, I strongly urge you to support the “Colorado Right to Rest Act.” This bill would ensure that everyone has the right to sleep, eat and rest in public spaces without the fear of ticketing or arrest. Similar bills have been introduced in California and Oregon.

A Little Background

I live in Old Town Fort Collins and am acutely aware of the homeless community – I see their members each day on the street. I also interact with homeless families through our church’s involvement in the Faith Family Hospitality program. Finally, I personally know several homeless individuals in the Fort Collins Homeless Coalition, a group that meets at our church, working tirelessly to decriminalize homelessness.

I have learned through my interactions with the homeless that people lose their homes to many things: job layoff, divorce, domestic abuse, injury or illness.

Without money to pay rent or mortgage, they start living with friends or family, or in cars. Eventually, they end up on the street, living “rough” or staying in shelters. Even if they have funds (and a good rent record), landlords won’t rent to them because they don’t have a permanent address!

Tickets and Jail

With no place to stay, members of the homeless community must eat, rest, and sleep outdoors. Unfortunately, in Ft. Collins, CO, they are fined \$100 for doing so. That’s right – sitting on a street bench to rest results in a ticket; so does lying on a blanket under a tree!

Because the homeless have little or no money, they cannot pay their tickets, and because they have no transportation, they often cannot get to court to contest their tickets.

If they have four or more tickets, they are jailed and have a felony misdemeanor on their records.

Once out of jail, they cannot find a job to support themselves because of their jail record, and eventually they find themselves homeless again.

And the whole cycle starts again.

Treating the homeless like criminals is unethical, immoral, and just plain wrong!

The Reality

Think about it. When you are homeless, you cannot eat, sleep, groom yourself, or go to the bathroom in the privacy of your own home – you must do so outdoors, often in public view.

With no way to shower or wash your clothes, your hygiene suffers. With no closet, you have to carry all your belongings on your back or in a rolling luggage cart.

You become an object of suspicion and ridicule. No one will make eye contact with you. It is a terribly dehumanizing process.

And if that's not punishment enough, our city has few public bathrooms, no public lockers to accommodate belongings, and no places where the homeless can sit and rest. If someone with a backpack or luggage cart tries to sit against a building and rest, they are ticketed. If they try to sleep under a tree in a park, they are ticketed.

Rest and sleep are basic human needs, and these individuals are denied them. It is a waste of police resources to send officers to disrupt a resting person who will simply move to a different resting place for the night. Worse, disrupting much-needed sleep and moving people during cold or inclement weather poses a direct threat to human safety, health, and life.

A Bed or a Meal?

Our city of 150,000 also has an inadequate shelter system with only two shelters. Because there are always 100 more people than beds in the shelter, the shelter must implement a lottery system to decide who gets a bed. People line up at 6 pm for a lottery ticket that tells them whether they have a place to sleep. While they wait in line, they miss the evening meal at the shelter. They must make a choice: wait in line for a meal or wait in line for a bed. And after waiting, if they do not "win" the lottery, they are turned away – men, women, and children.

After the lottery, they must leave and wait until 10 pm to return to the shelter. For the next 3-4 hours, they must find protection from the Colorado cold. But when they try to rest or sleep somewhere, they are ticketed, and told to "move along." They are exhausted, freezing, and hungry.

In fact, in the last several months, two homeless individuals died of exposure after failing to get into a shelter.

Homelessness is an economic situation, not a social disease! We must help those who find themselves without shelter. We must stop making poverty a crime and change the laws that make it so – let's start at the state-level by passing the Colorado Right to Rest Act!

Sincerely,

Martha Roden

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