

To: House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing

Re: Testimony in support of **H-5953 – Warming and Cooling Centers** and **H-5665 Amendments to the Homeless Bill of Rights**

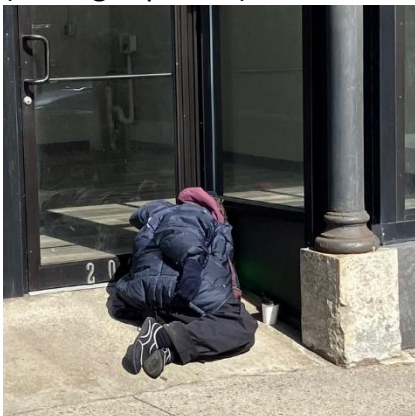
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Date: April 2, 2025

Yesterday, April 1, 2025 a team of ten members of the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project (RIHAP) spent from 7:30 AM to 5 PM in teams of two, for two hours each, to observe the activity of the Providence Police in Kennedy Plaza. There have been reports of increasing police harassment and mistreatment of homeless people on the street. Several service providers for the homeless have counseled and helped people who have been unlawfully searched and even assaulted. Despite a meeting with the police chief, the abuse continues.

I was at Kennedy Plaza with Ilca for the 7:30 to 9:30 AM shift. In our timeframe we observed no interaction of the police with the homeless. At our RIHAP meeting noontime today we will hear back from the other teams. We did hand out a flyer about bills H-5953 and H-5665. We told folks that there are many state representatives and senators who are very concerned for them, who want to increase support and protections for unsheltered homeless who are living on the street or in tents. Homeless people we spoke with are very appreciative. On their behalf we thank you for these creative, realistic and very much needed additions to the Rhode Island General Laws.

We met Roger, a homeless guitarist, who had spent the night sleeping in a bus shelter in Newport. He told me he used to be a bartender there. He came to Providence to go to the community center and to get out of the morning rain. Ilca told me he plays his guitar on the street for donations. (See right photo.)



After our 7:30 AM shift I spent a few hours walking the streets of downtown Providence, finding other homeless folks and delivering copies of the flyers about the two bills and the hearing today to organizations helping the homeless and poverty-stricken families. On my walk I passed a woman sleeping in a doorway. (See left photo.)



On my way driving home I crossed over route 95 to get on the 195 ramp, just a few hundred feet from Crossroads, I was surprised to see a man sitting in a tent with his dog. I stopped to say hello and make a donation. His name is Pat, a younger man staying there with his wife who

was out at time seeking food and other services. Pat showed me the bottom of his legs from under his blanket. Both of his feet were amputated above the ankle. He explained that his diabetes and neuropathy caused him to have cold feet. In December he, his wife and their dog had their tent behind a trailer at the Motel 6 in Warwick where many of the homeless have



been temporarily housed. They had the use of a bathroom where he accidentally scalded his feet in a hot bath tub. His burn wounds became infected. After one of the coldest nights this January his feet were frostbitten. Pat went by rescue to Rhode Island Hospital where both his feet had to be amputated.

Pat said that people have been good to him, helping with food and a new tent. City officials have routinely checked on them, including the animal control officer.

Better Lives RI told me last week that the homeless who have been temporarily sheltered at the Motel 6 have to leave by the end of April. They've no place to go. One homeless service provider, Open Doors, is frantically attempting to find a solution by the end of this month.

During this past very cold winter there have been fatalities of unsheltered homeless due to the extreme cold. I spoke with Kat, who is also homeless, at Kennedy Plaza yesterday. She told me that they have lost a number of friends this winter. I was reminded of Rico, who was found frozen to death in a bus shelter on North Main Street in January.

The Homelessness Emergency Continues

At RI Homeless Advocacy Project's community meeting on March 19, several homeless-experienced members were emphatic that the life-threatening crisis of the unsheltered homeless continues. While the end of winter gives some relief from exposure to freezing cold, there's serious concern about the dangers of the summer heat. One woman said, ***"We lose just as many people during the summer outside as we do in the winter. I've been out there in the summertime. It is hot. It is almost more dangerous than to be out there in the wintertime. It is worse. People cannot breathe in their tents."*** Direct service agencies have echoed this concern.

Growth in Homelessness

By all accounts, homelessness has increased in Rhode Island over recent years. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Annual Homeless Assessment Reports, homelessness in Rhode Island has more than doubled in the last five years, from 1,104 in 2020 to 2,442 individuals in 2024. The number of unsheltered homeless has grown five times, from 108 in 2020 to 534 in 2024. The current estimate of unsheltered homeless in Rhode Island is 683 individuals. This is a 26% increase in just the past 12 months.

| Homelessness in Rhode Island 2017-2024 | | | |
|---|-----------|-------------|-------|
| Point in Time Counts | | | |
| Year | Sheltered | Unsheltered | Total |
| 2017 | 1,111 | 69 | 1,180 |
| 2018 | 1,101 | 51 | 1,101 |
| 2019 | 984 | 71 | 1,055 |
| 2020 | 996 | 108 | 1,104 |
| 2021 | 1,086 | 181 | 1,267 |
| 2022 | 1,329 | 248 | 1,577 |
| 2023 | 1,476 | 334 | 1,810 |
| 2024 | 1,908 | 534 | 2,442 |
| Source: U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development | | | |
| Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress 2017-2024 | | | |

H-5953 Warming and Cooling Centers and H-5665 Amended Homeless Bill of Rights

These two bills, in combination, will go a long way to improving the survival and stability of the hundreds of unsheltered homeless people in Rhode Island. Most importantly, it engages all municipalities to increase their response to and support of the growing reality of unsheltered homeless people throughout the state. Plans will have to be created with the coordination of government and nonprofit and community resources to deliver a far more humane response to the housing crisis that so many of our fellow Rhode Islanders face.

Nobody wants to live outside in tents, or on the street. But some homeless people often have no alternative. Either the shelters are full or they are rejected for some reason and they are forced to muster the stamina and resourcefulness to create their own outside encampment. Or, if don’t have the ability, they end up in a bus shelter, on the street in doorways and worse. Living outside is a public health crisis that affects all of us. For the many people experiencing homelessness, living outside is both physically and mentally damaging. The hardship and suffering breaks them down. They become social outcasts and unable to function in society.

Beyond these important new laws, which will insist on better care for the unhoused, we need many more safe and affordable housing units to be created each year to stabilize the living conditions of thousands of homeless individuals and families so that they can get on with living fuller, healthier lives beyond their daily desperate struggle to survive. For this we ask that the Rhode Island Housing Department to create a **Housing 2030 Plan** that stretches well beyond its current draft 5-year goals for the number of affordable permanently supportive housing to be dramatically increased and in scale with the numbers who are in need.

The passage of H-5665 and H-5953 will not only improve conditions and support for unhoused, unsheltered homeless people in Rhode Island, it will literally save many lives.