

To: House Committee on Judiciary  
Re: Opposition to H 5919 Trespass & Vandalism Bill  
Date: March 18, 2025  
From: Bernie Beaudreau  
91 Wilson Avenue  
Rumford, RI  
401-440-4165

To: Members of the House Committee on Judiciary

As a concerned citizen of our state and volunteer advocating for the homeless, I am registering my strong opposition to House Bill 5919 Trespass and Vandalism Bill. This bill would create a new definition of "squatters" which may be interpreted to describe the majority of the 673 unsheltered homeless living outside, in encampments and other makeshift shelters. While I understand the right of property owner to engage the assistance of the police to remove someone inhabiting their property, I strongly object to the arrest and charging the inhabitants with a misdemeanor for squatting, punishable with a fine of \$1,000 or one year in prison, or both.

This law would criminalize homelessness in a horrendous way. Instead of initiating a helpful and caring intervention on the part of the community and local government services to aid help the homeless, it severely punishes those who are suffering on the very edge of survival who certainly don't have the money to pay a fine. It is an inhumane legislative proposal which would only exacerbate the crisis of the unsheltered homeless.

It is important that we work together to create greater understanding by our leaders and the general public of the major cause of homelessness, which is in fact, the lack of affordable housing. This is widely known but somehow not applied to the situation of the homeless. We tend to want to blame the homeless for their situation and we tend to consider and treat them as a public nuisance.

We all know the lack of adequate supply of low-rent housing, combined with rent inflation has housing taking a greater and greater portion of a household's income, including those at lowest levels of income. This downward supply pressure is creating more homelessness. When people become homeless, they need to find a shelter bed. If shelter beds are not available (most often the case), they must look for places to sleep outside such as under highway bridges, in back alleys and doorsteps, or in the woods in tents and makeshift shelters. Surviving living outside, especially during freezing and stormy weather breaks people down and creates a desperation and suffering very few of us have experienced or can imagine. Sadly, many die young due to the damage outside living has done to their bodies. Tragically, we have lost homeless people who have frozen to death this winter.

This winter has been the worst ever for homelessness, according to service providers who have served the homeless here in Rhode Island, many for several decades - Michelle Wilcox of Crossroads, Nick Horton of Open Doors, Laura Jaworski of House of Hope, Eric Hirsch of RI Homeless Advocacy Project and others working on the front lines of homelessness. And, unless state funding is sustained at the current 2025 levels, next winter could be apocalyptic for the homeless. Unfortunately, the Governor's proposed budget is lacking \$20 million needed to maintain the current level of services to the homeless. We are facing times when many of the homeless could perish without our intervention. This bill does nothing to help, only hurt.

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 673 individuals representing a 26% increase in just the past 12 months.

As a just and caring society and a community that takes care of its own, we should be figuring out ways to lend a hand to our fellow humans who have the least. They need our help and compassion, not punishment and reprimand.