

To: Rep. Carol Hagan McEntee, Chair, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee
Re: Opposition to H-7550 amendment making it a felony to be seen panhandling on federal or state highway property punishable by incarceration at the ACI
From: Bernie Beaudreau, community volunteer, Rumford, RI
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Date: March 24, 2026

Thank you Rep. McEntee and members of the House Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to register my opposition to H-7550. This bill would make the desperate survival behavior of many homeless individuals in our state a felony, punishable by no less than a year at the ACI. Charging these desperate, poor and homeless individuals, who are publicly asking for a little help, with a punishable crime would be another indication of our society's moral race to the bottom because we don't like seeing the poor, not on the street and not asking for help.

The growth in homeless and its visibility on street corners is not imagined. It continues to be a growing problem and challenge to our collective humanity.

Michelle Wilcox, President and CEO of Crossroads, the state's largest provider of services to the homeless, presented to the House Commission of Housing Affordability on March 12, 2026. In her comments she stated:

"Unfortunately, the need for our programs and services has never been greater... Homelessness has reach record levels, essentially doubling over the past five years. Before the Pandemic, Rhode Island had one of the lowest numbers of unsheltered homeless in the country. Since then, unfortunately, rapidly escalating rents, a shortage of affordable housing, and wages that have not kept pace with inflation have caused more and more people to fall into homelessness, including people who are working one and two jobs in some cases and people who have never experienced homelessness before... While we don't have the numbers yet for 2025, we believe the numbers will have risen again."

Michelle continued describing the need for more affordable permanently supported housing in the long term as well as increasing the number of shelter beds presently:

"Unfortunately, at a time when we're making great progress in our efforts to create more housing and address homelessness, we also face pretty significant challenges which are putting these critical resources at risk...Homelessness has reached record levels. As you all know, Rhode Island just simply doesn't have an adequate supply of affordable housing, and while we do everything we can to remedy that, developing housing takes time. And, while we continue to believe that creating more housing is the long-term solution, we also recognize that more

shelter beds are needed until the affordable housing supply catches up with the demand."

Against this real and accurate description of our state's current homelessness challenges, we are seeing increasing action at the municipal and state level to eliminate encampments without regard to the shelter and housing needs of the occupants. Woonsocket outlawed encampments last year, Providence and now East Providence routinely clear these encampments without providing alternative shelter, and Warwick is seeking to outlaw encampments as well.

And now this proposed law would criminalize homeless for their asking for help in a public manner, the only way they know how, when traffic is stopped at a light so that people will notice their homeless sign. They do it to survive. Perhaps one in ten passing cars will have someone who will be moved, sympathetic, and open their window, if they can, to give some change or a dollar or two.

I always get thanked, appreciated with a "God bless you" when I can safely open my window to offer some small help. I feel bad that people are reduced to begging and am convinced that only people who are desperate for help will have the courage and stamina to wait in a street median strip or street corner in any weather to meet their daily needs. While it may be inconvenient and slow traffic down, this may be one of the most effective ways to remind the general public that we have a serious problem of poverty and homelessness in our communities and that we need to do something about it, to help people and not punish them for their misfortune.

The unintended consequence of such a punitive and incarceration-heavy law punishing the homeless, who we are seeing in increasing number on the street, could be a rapidly growing population of inmates at the ACI. I have heard from homeless folks more than once that at least in prison you get a bed to sleep on and three meals a day.

Please don't take this step to lower our humanity by punishing people who are desperate for help. Let's find ways to change the causes of homelessness and help people rather than punish them for the sad situation into which they have fallen.