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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT/AMEND

TESTIMONY ON 26-H 8000, RELATING TO PROPERTY – HOMELESS BILL OF RIGHTS March 5, 2026

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this legislation, which would generally require 15 days advance notice before police could break up homeless encampments on public property. We applaud the Speaker for introducing this bill and for recognizing that in dealing with the housing crisis in our state, one cannot forget the need to directly address the rights of the unhoused. However, we would also urge amendments to the bill to strengthen the protections available to people residing in these spaces who are sometimes victimized by encampment removal efforts.

Our organization has continually heard from both unhoused people and advocacy groups for the homeless about the harm caused by the police destruction of encampments, often with little or no advance notice. In addition to truly leaving them homeless, these raids on encampments have frequently resulted in the destruction of the little property they have – including critical documents like ID cards, medications, and other vital personal belongings.

Therefore, in addition to establishing an advance notice requirement, we would urge that the bill be amended to address this issue as well. Legislation introduced on the subject in recent years by Rep. Stewart has proposed that, except to address immediate health or safety hazards, police be required to maintain any personal property found onsite for thirty days (or some other reasonable period of time), and that the written notice of a planned encampment removal indicate where and how that property can be retrieved. A related and useful addition to the bill we would recommend is a requirement for police departments to adopt a formal policy governing encampment removals to ensure they are conducted in an orderly and fair fashion and in accordance with the law.

Finally, we note that Rhode Island Street Medicine has recommended amendments to expand the time for providing notice of an encampment removal and to create a process to ensure that the listed exceptions from complying with the advance notice requirement are not misused. Based on our knowledge of that organization's direct involvement in dealing with encampment inhabitants, we would support those amendments as well.

We think this legislation is an important and useful step in better protecting the rights of the unhoused, and we urge its approval with consideration of the amendments described above.

Thank you for considering our views.