

Testimony of Kenneth G. Russell on H.492, The Homelessness Bill of Rights, Introduced by Representative Tom Stevens, and others.

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Good morning, my name is Ken Russell. I am the chair of the Montpelier Homelessness Task Force. I'm here to speak in support of the Homelessness Bill of Rights by Representative Tom Stevens and colleagues.

The task force was created, in part, as a response to concerns raised by downtown merchants and business owners about the conditions downtown, including the behavior of a number of folks on the streets. Another element pushing for this work was a group of folks, including unhoused individuals themselves, advocating for this population, seeking ways to help this population rise out of desperate situations. As the task force we have a responsibility to address the concerns of these groups and of the greater community. By working together, with dignity, respect, and determination, we are truly on our way towards achieving meaningful solutions to these challenges.

The delineation of the full standing of the unhoused population, as spelled out in this bill gives us all have clarity, and practical grounding, on how to approach these complex human problems. Even as we might catalogue a list of issues regarding the behavior of certain individuals, and their impact on the social environment, we must also be acutely aware of their human plight. As full-fledged human beings they are both held responsible for their actions, as full-fledged human beings, they deserve the opportunity to meet their highest potential. Yes bootstraps matter, but so do encouragement and connection. Community matters, care and concern matter. Access to food and shelter matters, greatly.

Anyone familiar with Abraham Maslow's pyramid of human motives, or with basic common sense, understands the importance of getting these basic needs met. Humanity matters.

This means letting our most vulnerable in the door on a non-discriminating basis when they are trying to get their needs met. They should have the same rights of free movement as anyone else, as well as the same responsibilities and accountability.

Our task force has responded in a way that considers the full rights of the homeless population and in a way that we feel will be most effective in addressing the concerns of the larger community. The work is one and the same. Yesterday, one of our task force members, formerly homeless himself, put it nicely, "We all have the same mission. Montpelier doesn't want homeless people, and we don't want to be homeless."

Our group has worked to meet people where they are, and to advocate for responsiveness and efficacy in the system of service that is meant to help these folks, to help them move along to secure housing, appropriate service, and a well-balanced and healthy way of being. No one benefits when the potential of these folks is underutilized. These folks matter.

We are in the process of creating, with the blessing and support of a dedicated and forward-thinking City Council, two part-time peer street outreach positions. We believe this is the best way of addressing many of the issues that cause grief to folks we hear from, and is the best first step in helping folks get to where they want to be in their lives, into housing, into services, or just staying alive for one more night. This is the front lines of treating humans in crisis with the dignity and care that they deserve. We've also advocated for safety on the streets and forests for those left out of shelters, for transportation to motels, when available, and for basic life-supporting supplies, such as hand warmers, dry sleeping bags, easy to consume nourishment.

This work reflects the best of small-town Vermont values. It reflects the strength in our moral fabric and community resilience. I am in true awe of the amount of responsiveness and care in our communities. The Vermont ethic is alive and well.

The Homelessness Bill of Rights grounds us in these values. It is a logical extension of our proud tradition of fighting for civil liberties. It does not unnecessarily encumber private interests. It merely says that these folks are fully human and are not second-class citizens, and it leads to better outcomes.

Left to the wrong devices, we're very good at otherizing. Social science has demonstrated this, and our history has been marked with both great steps forward towards inclusivity and equal justice but also by big steps backwards. When you review the list of protected classes in anti-discrimination law, you are reviewing the historical march towards full equality for all. It is clear as day that homeless people are discriminated against on the basis of their housing status. It is clear as day that we use fear and prejudice when we are better served using moral clarity and courage. This clear statement of our better selves grounds us, reminds us of what is truly important.

The Vermont Constitution, that states that Vermonters are "equally free and independent." Another expression of that sentiment was in the famous picture from the Civil Rights movement, when Memphis sanitation workers held up signs that said, "I am a man." That simple statement says so much. Whether man or woman, let's remember this basic truth.

Thank you for your time.