

My name is Joseph Gainza. I live in Marshfield, Vermont and as a parishioner of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Montpelier, I volunteer at the weekly warming shelter held at the church every Wednesday evening.

Thank you Chairman Stevens, for sponsoring this bill; thank you committee members for considering it. I ask you to pass the bill out unanimously.

As written, the bill does an excellent job of protecting the human, political and civil rights of people who are homeless. It reflects the best traditions of Vermont, including care for our neighbors. It is a big step toward creating the means for improving the lives of people without homes and to effectively reduce the number of people who presently live on the streets of our cities and towns. I will mention four such means shortly.

First, I want to point out something that is obvious when we think about it, but is sometimes obscured when formulating policy and even when advocating for an identified group of people. I am not suggesting that anyone in this room falls into this error, I just want to keep our eyes on the true subject of this effort. We are not talking about an issue or a problem, about data, statistics, constituencies, voters, consumers or citizens. We are talking about people, human persons who are like us in almost every way, except that we have a home and they do not. As Pope Francis said, in a different context, “Giving more importance to the adjective rather than the noun – this is not ‘good... It does not matter who you are, or how you live your life, or have this or that tendency – you do not lose your dignity.” \* To keep this in the forefront of my own mind, I use the term “people who are homeless” not “homeless people.” I ask us all to keep this in mind as we debate and decide on this bill. We are talking about people.

The rights enumerated in the bill are crucially important, and having their protections become law is an essential foundation for ending homelessness in Vermont. But people are not warmed, fed or sheltered by having rights in statutes unless they find expression in action. Two actions which this Legislature can take immediately are: a commitment by the state to provide Vermont municipalities which apply for it, funds to construct and maintain public toilets, lockers, and showers; and adding increased funding for the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund, specifically targeted to affordable housing throughout the state. Bonding for this purpose is a fine alternative. These investments will pay for themselves as the health, safety, and general well being of individuals and families presently homeless improves.

Additionally, to make it possible for more people to be able to afford housing, I also ask all members of this committee to support bills which increase the minimum wage in the state, and expand health care coverage for everyone.

Thank you, and thank you for your service to the people of Vermont.

Joseph Gainza  
Marshfield, VT  
802-522-2376  
[jgainza@vtlink.net](mailto:jgainza@vtlink.net)

\*Austin Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*. Henry Holt Company, 2019; p. 335.