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I do not sit before you armed with piles of facts and figures, prepared to speak to specific legislation. I come before you to share my insights as an advocate who listens to, serves, and lives with those known as “homeless”. Since the day, at the age of 15, that I protested the abuse my father heaped on my brother, I have identified with the powerless, and fought to bring safety and dignity to them. Thus I come before you today, to address a specific source of danger and harm, in the relationship between the community of the unhoused, and the larger community.

If you attend our vigil later, you will hear my lyric portrayal of what it feels like to live unhoused. Here and now, I want to put before you The abject danger into which our society is plunging.

When young, old and middle aged lose the safety of their domicile with regularity, from illness, relationship disruption, and the failure of families to cohere and provide mutual support,

When opioid dependence and alcoholism plague the bodies and minds of so many,

When fear and stigma of those who dwell on the street is rising,

we are not facing a momentary, transient glitch in the functioning of our society and community.

We are confronted by the effects of the broad and pervasive social policy that underwrites our law and economy;

We are confronted by the consequences of our choice to privilege private wealth and ambition over the collective well being.

Not to say You are able to change these rules unilaterally; they are written at a federal and global scale, and come to us from human nature and history.

But you and we suffer the rot those rules promote: You and we, are the tree whose limbs are green and appear healthy, while the trunk rots from inside, and you, and we, must address that rot, because it affects you, and us.

Homelessness isn't just a problem, it's a signal, And I am here to ask you to look at homelessness this way.

Recently in Burlington tensions have been rising between some who panhandle and use alleyways to eliminate waste, and the businesses nearby. The panhandling has grown aggressive, and the mess offensive. With some hand-wringing, and much real desperation, more privileged members of the community ask “What are we going to do?”. What if we do not look at this behavior as something to be corrected? What if we ask “What are **we** doing wrong?”. To this I would answer: raise the floor on the quality of life. Start by installing or opening bathrooms which can impart to the entire community the dignity of a place to eliminate waste in a socially acceptable way. These street practices are signals of rot, and if you want to arrest the rot, start by insisting on the social solidarity which provides dignity to the lives of those so situated.

Another way to arrest the rot of social indignity and loss of safety is to accommodate those who resort to living outdoors with policies I call “Safe Parking, Safe Camping.” You will have before you my brief of such a policy. It does not represent the only approach, but as an activist in the homeless community for four years, this is what I think will work. Essentially, the strategy is to recognize, in some form that is legal and provides safety to those who cannot afford housing, what already exists: people living in campers, cars, and tents, or sleeping on church lawns and in ATM booths. Already in some ways and in many communities, people are allowed to rest in peace, but in many ways and communities, they are not, and I am here to ask you to insist on safety and dignity for those who must live outdoors.

I am asking you to require every town to create a plan that provides "Safe Parking, Safe Camping". I would give them a year to create a draft, a second year to evaluate their plans, a third year to implement them. The social and cultural challenges are significant; we are seeking to address the causes of social rot, we cannot expect instant changes.

I would also like you to pass the Homeless Bill of Rights, these are obvious measures to combat the rot that is signaled by homelessness, but after reading again the Homeless Bill of Rights, I don't think Safe Parking, Safe Camping fits as a "right". To state it as such would place a precipitate burden on towns, forcing them to respond without due planning or guidance. I think a separate bill, addressing public safety and accommodation of folks living desperately, would provide more time to listen, and find locally meaningful solutions. I think many municipalities do not have a problem because they are not hassling people, so their planning would be nominal, but in many others people who cannot find a place to live cannot get a good night sleep.

I do not want to create, under present conditions, a network of identified, specified homeless camps. I want to recognize current responses to the loss of housing, and bring them into relationship with the law and the communities in which they are. I want to add a layer of safety, and allow the practice of these policies to guide us as we respond to changing conditions. Allowing and expecting towns to write plans forces them to think about the most vulnerable, and consider their needs in the conduct of municipal business. It invites innovation, and allows us to discover "best practices", through the multiplicity of solutions.

Thank you for considering my testimony.