**Homelessness is Not a Crime**

A case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court asks whether ticketing and arresting unhoused people for sleeping outside is cruel and unusual punishment. We think the answer is clearly yes, it is.

Unsheltered homelessness has been increasing since the pandemic, but it’s the result of decades of underinvestment in affordable housing, healthcare, and community-based services at all levels. Unfortunately, some cities are responding with counter-productive measures that temporarily remove unhoused folks from public view but do nothing to solve the problem.

Several years ago, Grants Pass, Oregon began issuing tickets to people sleeping in public, even though there were not enough accessible shelter beds available. Several courts ruled it unconstitutional to punish people for sleeping outside when they have no other place to go. The city appealed the case to the Supreme Court, which hears oral arguments in *Johnson v. Grants Pass* on April 22.

If the Supreme Court rules in favor of Grants Pass, cities and states across the U.S. will be free to ticket and arrest those who are forced to sleep outside even when no other housing or shelter options are available.

Laws that punish people for sleeping outside not only violate the U.S. Constitution, they violate human dignity.

The punitive approach makes it even more difficult for people to escape homelessness because once you have a criminal record and debt, it’s much harder to find landlords willing to rent and employers willing to hire. And people often lose the documents they’ll need to obtain housing and jobs when their encampments get raided.

We all want clean streets. We all want to eradicate homelessness. But criminalizing homelessness just pushes people around from one place to another. And taxpayers pay to divert police away from real crimes to ticket and arrest people for sleeping. Taxpayers pay to house people in jail. Taxpayers pay to prosecute people in court. And people who can’t afford the rent certainly can’t afford to pay off fines and fees.

We can’t arrest our way out of the homelessness problem. The most effective way to end unsheltered homelessness is to provide stable, affordable housing with case management, voluntary mental health and substance use treatment, and employment services. When no permanent housing options are available, use hotels until they are. Reduce barriers in emergency shelters and use frequent street outreach to connect unhoused people to housing and resources.

We must also work to prevent homelessness upstream. More than 700,000 Ohioans are now spending over half their income on rent, and rents are still rising. By reducing zoning and land use restrictions, communities can increase housing supply to make it more affordable. Strengthening legal protections for tenants and creating eviction diversion programs can prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Congress and the Statehouse must also invest in proven solutions, like increasing housing vouchers, expanding programs to preserve and develop affordable housing, and providing emergency rental assistance to stabilize families so they can avoid homelessness.

Safe, decent, affordable homes are the building blocks for healthy, vibrant communities. We all benefit when everyone has stable place to call home.