

Testimony Regarding S.B. 896: An Act Concerning A Homeless Person's Bill Of Rights

Respectfully Submitted by Rabbi Donna Berman, Executive Director, Charter Oak Cultural Center

Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and members of the Public Health Committee – thank you for taking the time to read my testimony. I moved from to Connecticut from New York 15 years ago and, frankly, have never felt more proud to live in this state than I do now as two bills protecting the rights and liberties of people who are experiencing homelessness are before the legislature: H.B. No. 672, An Act Concerning Intimidation Based On Bigotry Or Bias Against a Homeless Person. and the piece of legislation you are considering, S.B. No. 896, An Act Concerning a Homeless Person's Bill of Rights.

This is a glorious and noble moment for Connecticut. Both of these actions will benefit all the residents of our state, making Connecticut a more just and humane place and, at the same time, thrusting us on the national stage as we set an example for how to care for the most vulnerable among us that, hopefully, the rest of the country will follow.

We who are lucky enough to live in our own homes and apartments, can lock our doors, turn on an alarm system and go to sleep knowing that we and our possessions are safe. We have a place to go to get out of the rain and snow and the heat of the sun.

For our homeless sisters and brothers, this is not the case. During the day, when the shelters are closed to them, they have no place else to be but in libraries, in parks, on benches. They need and deserve the right to be treated with respect and dignity. Their rights to use and enjoy public spaces must be reinforced, because they are too often violated.

Just because someone does not have a permanent home does not mean that they deserve to be harassed or criminalized or treated with any less care than any other citizen. Just because someone does not have a permanent home does not mean that they have any less right to privacy and protection.

The burden of homelessness is great enough. Cruelty and violence against those who are homeless must stop.

While we very much appreciate your consideration of this bill, we urge you to pass a amended version (see attached) that adds more specificity and, therefore, more protection for those who are homeless. Patterned after the Rhode Island Homeless Persons' Bill of Rights, the amended bill, created by a group of people experiencing homelessness and their allies, contains greater protections than the proposed Connecticut bill.

Our homeless sisters and brothers are daily mistreated and maligned. This must stop. This piece of legislation would go a long way to bringing these abuses to an end.

This is an important moment in Connecticut's history. I hope you will have the courage to do what is right and to protect the rights and liberties of all our citizens, including some of the most vulnerable among us, those who are experiencing homelessness.

Thank you.

**ADDITIONS AND MAJOR POINTS TO THE  
RAISED BILL NO. 896  
CONNECTICUT HOMELESS BILL OF RIGHTS**

(1) At the present time, many Connecticut residents continue to face the specter of homelessness due to the severe shortage of affordable housing, the impacts of economic hardship and economic downturn in our state, and a shrinking social safety net.

(2) Article 1, Section 1 of the Connecticut State Constitution states in part, that “All [people] when they form a social compact, are equal in rights.”

(3) In line with this essential statement of the common law, it is reaffirmed that no person should have these rights compromised, face unequal treatment, or suffer unnecessarily due to discrimination based on his or her housing status. This chapter intends to address and prevent the continuation of these negative impacts to Connecticut residents who lack a permanent home.

**Each homeless person in this state has the right to:**

- 1. Move freely and use public spaces, including public sidewalks, in public parks, on public transportation and in public buildings without harassment or intimidation from law enforcement officers, or others in the same manner as other persons.**
- 2. Equal opportunities for employment, and has the right not to face discrimination while seeking or maintaining employment due to his or her lack of permanent being that of a shelter or a social service provider.**
- 3. Receive emergency medical care, free from discrimination based on his or her housing status.**
- 4. Register to vote and receive necessary documentation to prove identity for voting without discrimination due to his or her housing status. The Secretary of State shall provide voter registration identification cards, free of charge.**
- 5. Protection from disclosure of his or her records and information provided to homeless shelters and service providers to state, municipal, and private entities without appropriate legal authority and the right to confidentiality of personal records and information in accordance with all limitations on disclosure established by the Federal Homeless Management Information System, Federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and the Federal Violence Against Women Act.**
- 6. Reasonable expectation of privacy with his or her personal property; to the same extent as personal property in a permanent residence.**
- 7. Receive equal treatment by state and municipal agencies without discrimination based on housing status.**