

September 9, 2025

The Honorable James Comer
Chairman, House Committee on
Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Robert Garcia
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Oversight and Government Reform
2105 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Comer and Ranking Member Garcia:

On behalf of the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](https://www.endhomelessness.org) (hereinafter “the Alliance”), a nonpartisan, nonprofit, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness, I urge you to **oppose H.R. 5163, legislation seeking to penalize people for experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia (DC)**, scheduled for markup up by the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight on Wednesday, September 10.

H.R. 5163 would fine and / or imprison anyone who camps (“set up, maintain, or establish a temporary place of abode” for any period of time) “outdoors on public property” in DC. Because of inadequate shelter and housing opportunities in DC—[at last count in January 2025](#), almost 800 people were unsheltered in the District each night, over one hundred more people than before COVID—they have no choice but to sleep outside. On a single night in January 2024, there were only enough DC shelter beds for [79% of individual adults experiencing homelessness](#). Last year, only 32 rental homes were affordable and available in DC for every 100 extremely low-income households.

At the individual level, instead of solving the root causes of homelessness, punitive policies which criminalize homelessness—including laws which fine, arrest, and imprison people for being homeless (sleeping, standing, sitting, eating, and engaging in other unavoidable human activities) in public spaces, when there is nowhere else for them to go--[prolongs](#) the cycle by creating barriers to stability and recovery. And at a community level, providing housing is the most effective way to keep public spaces safe and accessible for everyone.

1. Homelessness remains a housing problem. The seminal work, [Homelessness is a Housing Problem](#), explains: “(A)bsolute rent levels and rental vacancy rates are associated with regional rates of homelessness. Many common explanations—drug use, mental illness, poverty, or local political context—fail to account for the regional variations.”

- During the [January 2024 national count](#), more than 270,000 Americans—36% of those experiencing homelessness—were unsheltered. Not only is there a [nationwide shortage](#) of 200,000 year-round shelter beds for adults, but also too many existing shelter beds screen too many people out through restricting people’s ability to remain with their families, pets, and possessions, as well as pose threats to people’s privacy and safety.
- Affordable housing options remain scarce, particularly for people with the lowest incomes. Nationwide, there is an [estimated shortage](#) of 7.3 million such rental units. [Studies](#) from Denver and Los Angeles found that around 90% of people experiencing homelessness would move into housing if available and accessible, and 95% of people want to [engage with services](#).
- Safe, stable housing is a [prerequisite](#) for addressing mental health and substance use, but as a country we have systematically defunded the supportive services and health care infrastructure that many people experiencing homelessness need in order to maintain housing stability.
- When available and accessible, housing and services can end homelessness, for example in Houston, Texas, which [reduced homelessness by 63%](#) using this approach.

2. Criminalization of homelessness distracts us from the real solutions to homelessness—building and preserving affordable housing, providing adequate rental assistance, and pairing such housing with individualized supportive services. HUD's [Housing Choice Vouchers](#) are critical to reducing homelessness, improving outcomes for children and families, and lifting people out of poverty. However, only one-fourth of the people eligible for such vouchers can secure them because of insufficient federal funding. The inevitable consequences of our failures to build and preserve more affordable housing and adequately fund affordable housing and homelessness programs are historic levels of people experiencing homelessness and people becoming homeless for the first time (including many very young children and an increasing number of [older adults](#)).

3. Criminalizing homelessness fails to reduce homelessness. Laws criminalizing homelessness have existed in numerous cities for decades, providing scholars with data to study their outcomes. [There is no evidence](#) to suggest that the passage of these laws is responsible for a meaningful reduction in unsheltered or overall homelessness at either a city or county-wide scale. Indeed, even when cities dedicate significant resources to closure efforts, calls complaining about encampments in the area have not been shown to decrease, as people experiencing homelessness lack adequate alternatives.

4. Punitive homelessness policies waste law enforcement resources that could instead be used focusing on real crime and are often more costly than simply providing people experiencing homelessness with the housing and services they need to thrive. Housing and services can be cheaper, especially for people who frequently interact with law enforcement and crisis health care services. Providing housing and services significantly reduces costs to other systems like hospitals and emergency services. [A study analyzing three Florida counties](#) found that supportive housing for chronically homeless individuals, compared to annual in-inpatient hospitalizations, emergency room fees, incarceration and other systems associated with homelessness, reduces overall community costs by 68%.

5. Criminalizing homelessness makes it significantly harder to get people experiencing homelessness housed.

- Even the threat of criminalization laws can lead people experiencing homelessness to flee into more dangerous environments, distancing themselves from services, health care, and support systems decreasing the likelihood they will call upon law enforcement to address safety concerns.
- Enforcement of criminalization laws often includes confiscating and destroying people's crucial medical items, like prescriptions, as well as documents vital to keeping jobs and housing like driver's licenses and birth certificates, and benefits cards.
- Missed work, fines, jail time, and criminal records resulting from enforcement of criminalization laws can lock people into homelessness, driving them into debt and leaving them vulnerable to arrest for failure to pay fines; and costing them their jobs and depriving them of access to public benefits, shelter, health care, substance use treatment, and other vital resources.

Thank you for your consideration. Homeless services providers in communities across the nation need your help serving people, yet punitive and costly policies distract us from the real solutions which work to reduce unsheltered homelessness: providing affordable shelter and housing, with individualized services. Please contact the Alliance's John Threlkeld (jthrelkeld@naeh.org) for questions.

Sincerely,



Ann M Oliva
Chief Executive Officer
National Alliance to End Homelessness