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September 9, 2025

The Honorable James Comer
Chairman
The Honorable Robert Garcia
Ranking Member
House Committee on Oversight & Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member:

I write to express my deep concern with H.R. 5163, which the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform (OGR) will markup tomorrow. H.R. 5163 would impose criminal penalties for **anyone** camping on public property in the District of Columbia and contains no exemption for veterans. Criminalizing homelessness, particularly veteran homelessness, threatens to undo our critical efforts and progress in ending veteran homelessness. From my perspective as Ranking Member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the penalties and displacements imposed by this bill would actively hurt the very population we are supposed to be helping.

There has been a nationwide reduction in veteran homelessness of over 50 percent since 2011. The 2024 Point in Time (PIT) count estimated 32,882 veterans were experiencing homelessness on a single night. Of the homeless adult population, 5.3 percent are veterans, 51 percent are homeless veterans with disabilities, and 50 percent are homeless veterans who are age 51 or older, compared to 19 percent of homeless non-veterans. The reduction in veteran homelessness can be attributed to an adherence to Housing First principles through the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) two most effective homelessness programs—Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) and Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH).

Under SSVF regulations, for example, it is noted that, "re-housing assistance is offered without preconditions (such as employment, income, absence of criminal record, or sobriety), and the resources and services provided are typically tailored to the unique needs of the household." Those two VA homelessness programs, considered to be the gold standard for homelessness programs both in the United States and abroad, have been instrumental in reducing veteran homelessness by 50 percent over the last dozen years. Programs like SSVF and HUD-VASH,

which are proven to work, depend on stability, not arrests and fines, to connect veterans with housing and services.

It is absurd to think that the use of criminal penalties against veterans and others experiencing homelessness will do anything other than harm people for being impoverished and make it harder for them to get back on their feet. I see this bill as the Administration and Republican Majority doubling down on the failed strategy of criminalizing homelessness instead of tackling root causes. We know from years of data this approach does not work and pushes people further away from housing and services, while driving up costs, and making outcomes worse for both veterans and non-veterans. Instead, we should focus on real solutions – like building and preserving affordable housing, providing adequate rental assistance, and pairing such housing with individualized supportive services.

Criminalization harms people experiencing homelessness, including veterans, through:

1. displacement, as people are either forced to move from place to place by law enforcement or to avoid law enforcement contact;
2. loss or destruction of possessions, including legal and financial documents like driver's licenses, medical equipment and prescriptions, and meaningful personal effects;
3. fines, fees, arrest records, and/or incarceration, which only increase barriers to accessing stable housing and finding or maintaining employment, thereby prolonging homelessness; and
4. isolating people, including veterans, from essential services like healthcare and education and employment services, including those offered by VA.

This is not just about a D.C.-specific bill. H.R. 5163 fits into the broader pattern we have seen from the Administration—the skinny budget proposals gutting HUD homelessness programs, the Executive Order taking aim at Housing First, and a legislative proposal from the Administration to dismantle the HUD-VASH program. Step by step, criminalization is being elevated to federal policy. If H.R. 5163 receives bipartisan backing, even narrowly, it risks setting a precedent that undercuts decades of work reducing veteran homelessness. Should you have any questions, please contact Ms. Ally Cimino, Staff Director for the Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, at Ally.Cimino@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Ranking Member