

Opponent Testimony - HB2430

Dustin Hare – Co-Founder of Wyco Mutual Aid

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Chair Averkamp and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in opposition to HB2430 because I personally know many of the people who would be negatively affected if this were to pass. I am the co-founder of Wyco Mutual Aid, a community group founded at the onset of the pandemic to help struggling Wyandotte County residents. My work over the past 3 years has connected me with unhoused residents from all walks of life. I have also helped prevent homelessness for more than 60 households during that same time period. My intent here is to dissolve any myths that may exist about people experiencing homelessness.

The demographic that I have found to be most at risk of homelessness are folks who are retired or near retirement age and on a fixed income. I know a lot of people who have owned their homes for decades and can no longer afford their property taxes. The price of groceries goes up, utilities become more expensive, gas prices increase, medical bills pile up, but their income remains relatively the same. Eventually they're foreclosed upon. I am now going to recount some of their stories.

- A 73 year old man who worked a union job for 40 years. He recanted tales of he and his buddies running marathons throughout the entirety of his adult life. In 2019, he had a stroke and hasn't been able to work since. Despite his loyalty to his career, the only income he receives today is \$1538/month from Social Security. He is in danger of losing the home he has lived in since 1978 and he doesn't have anywhere to go when that happens.
- A woman in her mid-60s who has lived in the same home for 40 years. Throughout that time, she has been dedicated to her career in nursing. In 2017, she lost her husband, fell into depression, and started experiencing medical issues. She has had to cut her work hours back to less than 10 per week and can no longer make ends meet.
- A disabled matriarch who is taking care of her elderly mother and is also caring for her grandchildren. Her SSDI income is \$756/month. If she were to lose her home, it would be catastrophic for multiple generations.

Then you have folks who have worked their entire adult lives just trying to make ends meet. They're expected to keep this up until they're 65, when Medicare and Social Security kick in. But the reality is that a lot of people start experiencing medical conditions long before they hit 65. I know plenty of people in their 40s and 50s, who have been hard workers their whole lives, who are largely unable to continue working. Medical care gets deferred due to inability to pay, and conditions slowly worsen. Bad backs or knees, heart attacks and strokes, depression from losing a spouse, heart failure, fibromyalgia – these are all real reasons why people I know in Wyandotte County have become unhoused. Some days are okay, but other days it's tough to get out of bed. A lot of people are able to overcome these annoyances in their 30s, but that's no longer the case as folks approach 50. Decreased income due to inability to work is often compounded by inability to afford minor home repairs. Eventually those minor home repairs become major home repairs. Unfortunately there's no longer any money available for any of it and homelessness is the ultimate result.

Then you've got disabled people. We all have friends and family members who struggle with disabilities. With any luck, there's enough family and financial support available to keep these loved ones supported and on a path toward self-sustainability. Depending on the severity of the disability, parents sometimes need to support children indefinitely well into adulthood. In economically depressed areas, however, families sometimes can't afford these types of supports. Other times, parents end up incarcerated (an occurrence this bill seeks to increase) and any support mechanisms dissolve. Through no fault of their own, disabled teens and young adults end up unhoused.

There is one particular disabled, unhoused person whom I've gotten to know quite well. He's a delight to be around and an asset to his community. In the summer of 2021, he expressed to me and the other founding member of Wyco Mutual Aid his desire to get off the streets and get housed. We connected with various service providers around town to try to find accommodations for him, but the best we were able to do was get him on a waiting list. That waiting list was over 18 months long. This is someone who was actively trying to improve his situation. He was asking for assistance and checked all the boxes for prioritization, and yet there was no assistance available for him.

In 2022, I was part of a coalition of people trying to find housing for a young mother. She couldn't afford childcare which meant she couldn't work. We spent 6 weeks advocating for her, calling around town trying to find something. We couldn't find anything for her. Her and her children remained unhoused.

For the better part of three years, I have been engaging unhoused members of our community and advocating for solutions to homelessness. Throughout those three years, homelessness has continued to increase. Housing prices have skyrocketed. Rents have increased dramatically. Property taxes have gone up by nearly 50%. Little to no new construction has occurred. Literally nothing has been done to address this massive crisis. We're told there's no money available.

HB2430 does two things I appreciate. 1) it acknowledges that homelessness is a major issue and 2) it proposes new spending to address it. What I don't like about the bill is that it shifts the idea of what a "home" should look like. I've always had an idea in my head that a home would look like a house or an apartment. HB2430 proposes a new vision of what a home should look like: jail.

More and more people are going to continue to become homeless. This is the reality we're living in right now. Some of those people will be retired. Some will be 48 year old laborers whose bodies have given out on them. Some will be disabled. Some will have aged out of the foster system. There is no throughline for who experiences homelessness and, in our current economic environment, more demographics will begin to fall into this category.

I'm concerned for the friends I've made who are dealing with homelessness, should HB2430 become law. I'm concerned that they're going to end up in the criminal justice system, that they'll be subject to fees and fines that will set them back even further, and that they'll end up in jail for long sentences. As I stated previously, I've seen it take more than 18 months to get someone housed, so people aren't going to be able to stop committing the "crimes" defined in the bill such as "obstructing a sidewalk" or "sleeping." Once our system grinds them down to the point of homelessness, there quite literally is nowhere else to go.

I'm concerned for my friends, but I'm even more concerned about my beloved state of Kansas creating a system in which we replace housing with jails. From what I hear, our jails are already full. If we begin

criminalizing people for losing their homes, we're going to need to build more jails to house them. As I stated previously, when we ask for sensible solutions for addressing homelessness, such as constructing a homeless shelter in an urban county where no homeless shelter currently exists, we are told there is no money available. I can't help but think there will be even less money available if we are allocating more of the budget toward jailing people.

If folks are serious about addressing homelessness, we have solutions ready to go. I have a list of things I'd love to see funded. I, along with a couple other passionate friends, have kept 63 households from losing their homes over the last 18 months for a cost of only \$3,598 per household, a fraction of what it costs to take housing away and jail people. The Governor has been touting the huge budget surpluses the state has. Let's work together to fund solutions to reverse the trend in homelessness instead of criminalizing it.

Sincerely,

Dustin Hare

Co-Founder, Wyco Mutual Aid