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Chair Averkamp and Members of the Committee on Welfare Reform:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify **in opposition of House Bill 2430**. The Lawrence Community Shelter is a nonprofit agency serving individuals experiencing homelessness in Lawrence and Douglas County by providing shelter and connecting people to housing solutions.

Homelessness is a traumatizing experience whether someone is living on the streets or living in a crowded homeless shelter, surrounded by people each with their own trauma. Some people choose to avoid shelters if they're overcrowded because overcrowding leads to the spread of transmissible diseases, higher instances of conflict, and poor mental health outcomes. The realities of homelessness—especially long-term homelessness—are heavily linked to stories of trauma, stories of abuse, and stories of tragic life circumstances that people do not get to choose. Through community engagement, our staff works to debunk common stereotypes about homelessness and spread awareness about the harsh realities.

Did you know that the life expectancy for someone facing chronic homelessness is only 50 years of age?¹ Exposure to the elements, lack of social support, and the constant stress of a survival mindset wrecks havoc on both mental and physical health.

Did you know that a little over 50% of people facing chronic homelessness have a traumatic brain injury (TBI)?² TBIs can result from a stroke, a genetic condition, work injuries, war injuries for veterans, abuse injuries for survivors of domestic violence, or any head injury that is not diagnosed or treated. Only 2-3% of the general population experiences TBIs, but having a TBI can greatly increase your risk for homelessness.

Did you know that the fastest growing age group experiencing homelessness today is age 65 older?³ Sometimes people don't make enough in social security income, their retirement savings run out, they lose dual income when a spouse passes away, they experience a medical bankruptcy, or they lose everything in a fire or natural disaster. In our shelter, people who are elderly or have disabilities typically face the highest barriers to housing.

¹ Information from the National Health Care for the Homeless Council
<https://nhhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/HardColdFacts.pdf>

² Stubbs, Jacob L., et al. "Traumatic brain injury in homeless and marginally housed individuals: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *The Lancet Public Health* 5.1 (2020): e19-e32.
<https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2819%2930188-4>

³ Kushel, Margot. "Homelessness among older adults: an emerging crisis." *Generations* 44, no. 2 (2020): 1-7.
<https://generations.asaging.org/homelessness-older-adults-poverty-health>

Did you know that people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be the victims of crime and violence than they are to commit any violent crime?⁴ People that do not have a door that locks behind them are easier targets for theft, harassment, and violence. Arresting people for engaging in survival activities like sleeping, camping, or panhandling does not make cities safer; instead, it creates tension between local law enforcement and community members in extreme poverty who are most vulnerable to crime.

This bill is titled the “Safe Cities Act”, and yet no part of this bill promotes public safety. Instead, this bill criminalizes poverty and creates barriers to funding housing solutions for communities that need it the most. We already know that policies like this do not work. **Between 2006 and 2019, city bans on camping nation-wide increased by 92%; bans on sitting or laying down increased by 78%; bans on loitering or panhandling increased by 103%; and bans on living in one’s vehicle increased by 213%. In the same time period, homeless encampments grew by 1,300% nation-wide.**⁵ Criminalizing homelessness did nothing to slow down the growth of homeless encampments. Instead, it worsened the homeless crisis and sustained cycles of poverty. **Homelessness is now projected to increase by 49% nationally over the next 4 years.**⁶

Criminalizing homelessness is an expensive burden on taxpayers. Without stable housing, people are likely to cycle in and out of emergency departments, inpatient hospital stays, psychiatric centers, detoxification programs, and jails, resulting in high public costs and poor health outcomes for individuals including premature death.⁷ Numerous studies have shown that policies that focus on housing people—known as the Housing First approach—have proven to be the most effective way to address homelessness as a long-term solution. For example, a study from the Florida Central Housing Commission found the average annual cost of homelessness was close to \$31,000 per person per year while the provision of permanent supportive housing cost an average of about \$10,000 per person per year; in other words, housing people resulted in a community cost reduction of 68% for every person housed.⁸

⁴ Molly Meinbresse et al., “Exploring the Experiences of Violence among Individuals Who Are Homeless Using a Consumer-Led Approach,” *Violence and Victims* 29, no. 1 (2014): pp. 122-136, <https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.vv-d-12-00069>.

⁵ Eric S. Tars, Legal Director, National Homelessness Law Center. https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2021/06-08_Criminalization-of-Homelessness.pdf

⁶ Flaming, Daniel, et al. “Locked out: Unemployment and homelessness in the COVID Economy.” *Available at SSRN 3765109* (2021). <https://economics.org/publication/locked-out/>

⁷ National Alliance to End Homelessness.

<http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Cost-Savings-from-PSH.pdf>

⁸ Gregory A. Shinn, “The Cost of Long-Term Homelessness in Central Florida” (Central Florida Commission on Homelessness, 2014), <https://www.cfch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Eco-Impact-Report-LOW-RES-2.pdf>.

Here's another successful example. **The Department of Veterans Affairs uses evidence-based, cost-effective Housing First models to implement the VA Supportive Housing (VASH) Program.** The results of this program can be found on the VA website, including this statement:

“A demonstration project that compared a Housing First program offering immediate permanent housing without requiring treatment compliance, abstinence, or housing readiness with a treatment-first program for 177 homeless Veterans found that the Housing First initiative successfully reduced time to housing placement, from 235 to 35 days; housing retention rates were significantly higher among Housing First tenants; and emergency room use declined significantly among the Housing First cohort.”⁹

As a result of basing their strategy on a Housing First approach, homelessness among veterans has been reduced by 47% since 2010 and continues to decline. Housing First policies work. Criminalizing homelessness does not help anyone. Creating barriers to accessing funding for housing solutions will not only halt progress, but it will unnecessarily burden our state with heavy costs in the long-run. I hope that the members of this committee will choose not to criminalize poverty and instead invest their efforts in exploring real, impactful solutions that increase access to affordable housing and permanent supportive housing solutions.

The Lawrence Community Shelter opposes HB 2430.

Respectfully,



Lacey Roe

Director of Community Engagement

Lawrence Community Shelter

⁹ Department of Veterans Affairs
<https://www.va.gov/homeless/nchav/models/housing-first.asp>