

THE WRONG APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS



Homelessness and housing poverty is a crisis across the country – a crisis that stems from decades of underinvestment in affordable housing and healthcare, and one that demands urgent action. Misguided efforts to criminalize homelessness, impose punitive requirements, and prevent the development of affordable housing, such as those proposed by the Cicero Institute in its [model bill](#), are counterproductive and will make it even harder for people to exit homelessness.

To end homelessness in our communities, we must invest in proven solutions at the scale necessary. Providing access to affordable homes and voluntary healthcare and other services, as needed, is proven – by decades of research – to be more effective at ending homelessness and preventing housing instability than outdated and dehumanizing strategies.

CRIMINALIZATION MAKES HOMELESSNESS WORSE

The Cicero Institute model bill criminalizes homelessness, punishable by fines, jail time, or both. Criminalizing homelessness is:

- **Counterproductive.** Nearly all [people experiencing homelessness](#) are [not unsheltered by choice](#) but because they lack access to affordable housing, physical and mental health care, or adequate and humane emergency shelter. Arrests, fines, jail time, and criminal records make it more difficult for individuals experiencing homelessness to access the affordable housing, health services, and employment necessary to exit homelessness.
- **Expensive.** A growing body of research demonstrates that providing affordable housing and voluntary services is more cost-effective than outdated approaches, including criminalization. A [study](#) in Charlotte, NC found that the city saved \$2.4 million over the course of a year after creating a Housing First program. Tenants spent 1,050 fewer nights in jail and 292 fewer days in the hospital, and they had 648 fewer visits to emergency rooms. With limited state and local budgets, elected officials should turn to humane, cost-effective policies, not ineffective measures that waste taxpayer dollars.
- **Harmful to marginalized communities.** Criminalization will further marginalize Black, Indigenous and other communities of color, those with mental and physical disabilities, and LGBTQ youth and adults, who are already disproportionately affected by homelessness and mass incarceration.
- **Dehumanizing.** Laws contributing to the involuntary institutionalization of individuals experiencing homelessness have regularly been found to violate the civil rights of individuals with disabilities and any expansion of those laws would expand the harm they cause.

PUNITIVE REQUIREMENTS DO NOT WORK

The Cicero bill imposes punitive requirements, including time limits, work requirements, forced treatment, and sobriety. These rigid requirements are:

- **Ineffective.** By failing to prioritize access to affordable housing, this approach ignores the primary driver of homelessness: the severe shortage of housing affordable to the lowest-income and most marginalized people. According to research from the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#), there are fewer than four homes affordable and available for every ten extremely low-income households. Despite the need, just one in four eligible households receives any housing assistance because of chronic underfunding.
- **Outdated.** Forcing people into congregate shelters and advocating for a mandatory, punitive, behavior modification approach is based on outdated models that failed to rehouse people.

These earlier models set housing as the end goal – requiring participants to first participate in various supportive programs, abstain from drugs and alcohol, and adhere to a set of behavioral requirements before accessing housing. Costs were very high, and results were very limited. Instead of responding to individuals’ needs, participants would often become stuck at a certain point during the program or fall short of unattainable requirements. Those unable to succeed in the one-size-fits-all approach languished in large shelters or were pushed into institutions, with no path back to housing.

- **Dangerous.** A [study](#) conducted in Boston found that unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness faced mortality rates three times higher than those residing in shelters. A policy restricting access to shelters to only those individuals that meet strict requirements would put lives at risk.

SLASHING INVESTMENTS UNDERMINES EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

The Cicero bill redirects investments away from long-term solutions, like permanent supportive housing, to fund short-term crisis responses. Slashing investments in supportive housing:

- **Undermines housing stability.** Providing access to affordable housing, linked with voluntary services, rapidly ends homelessness and is cost-effective.
- **Undermines effective treatment.** Stable, affordable housing is a prerequisite for effective psychiatric and substance use treatment and for improving quality of life. Once stably housed, individuals are better able to take advantage of wrap-around services – to help support housing stability, employment, and overall health. Without stable housing, attaining these goals becomes much more difficult.

REAL SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS

The Cicero bill is not a real solution to homelessness. Policymakers should instead invest in proven strategies, like Housing First.

Housing First is an [evidence-based practice](#) backed by multiple, national studies that show that it is the most effective approach to ending homelessness for most individuals and families. Under the Housing First model stable, affordable, and accessible housing is provided to people experiencing homelessness quickly and without prerequisites, and voluntary supportive services – such as substance use and mental health counseling, and employment training, among others – are offered to help improve housing stability and well-being.

- **Effectively ends homelessness.** This model is [particularly effective](#) among people who have been homeless for long periods of time and have serious psychiatric disabilities, substance use disorders, and/or other disabilities.
- **Is cost effective.** Housing First is more cost-effective than allowing people experiencing homelessness to remain in shelters, [jails](#), or hospitals. Housing First can [improve health care and employment outcomes and reduce arrests and incarceration](#). Studies show that Housing First reduces costly hospital visits, admissions, and duration of hospital stays among homeless individuals, and [reduces public system spending](#).
- **Supports treatment.** Housing First is more effective at increasing service utilization than non-Housing First programs. Studies show Housing First programs are equally, if not more effective, than non-Housing First programs in reducing usage of alcohol, stimulants, and opiates. Fears about increased substance use and psychiatric symptoms have not been supported by research findings.

Learn more about the evidence supporting Housing First [here](#). For more information, contact NLIHC senior vice president of public policy and field organizing Sarah Saadian at ssaadian@nlihc.org.