

Successfully Fighting Against State and Local Homelessness Criminalization Bills

Since 2020, the [Cicero Institute](#), a billionaire-backed think tank, has implemented a well-funded, coordinated campaign to pass bills criminalizing unhoused individuals, impose punitive requirements, and prevent the development of affordable housing. Other bills criminalizing homelessness, but not directly connected to Cicero, have emerged as well. These efforts are counterproductive, harm unhoused individuals, and will make it even harder for people to exit homelessness.

While unique to each jurisdiction, legislation criminalizing homelessness often requires communities to remove encampments, institute statewide camping bans that allow for offenders to be fined and jailed; prohibit local governments from discouraging enforcement of state or local bans; redirect funds to temporary measures and makes it easier to involuntarily commit people to a state psychiatric facility. These ill-informed/harmful policies are costly, ineffective, and trap people in a cycle of homelessness and institutions without a path to housing. They also redirect investments away from underfunded evidence-based solutions, like [Housing First](#) and the development of safe, affordable, and accessible homes.

Under the Housing First model, people experiencing homelessness are housed quickly and without prerequisites. This approach is [backed](#) by [decades of research](#), learning, and bipartisan support. Communities across the country prioritize [Housing First](#) because it is a flexible model that can be tailored to address the unique needs of individuals and local communities. On the contrary, legislation criminalizing homelessness takes away local control by instituting a one-size-fits-all approach to homelessness.

Successful Responses to Homeless Criminalization Legislation

States and localities across the country are rejecting harmful, outsider approaches to addressing homelessness. So far, policy measures to criminalize homelessness have failed in ten [out of twelve states](#) in which they have been introduced and voted on, including Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Advocates in the above-mentioned states have used various approaches to thwart the implementation of legislation criminalizing homelessness. Many have written op-eds [reaffirming housing first and its importance in ending homelessness](#). Some advocated for policy makers to **strip proposed legislation of the most harmful aspects**. And others have **called out Cicero for parachuting into states and preventing local solutions** to the homelessness crisis. Advocates have organized their networks around [call to actions](#), and created [one pagers](#), [infographics](#), and [statements](#) on the impact of the harmful legislation, if they were to pass. Below are a few examples of campaigns that were effective in pushing back against efforts to criminalize homelessness and reduce funding for proven solutions.

Georgia advocates, including regional legal advocates and public sector partners, ensured that [SB 62](#) was stripped of its most harmful provisions before it was enacted. Additionally, a requirement for a statewide audit of homeless funding was amended to include expenditures by law enforcement on criminalization to better understand the financial burden these new measures place on local municipalities.

Kansas advocates mobilized stakeholders across multiple sectors – including faith-based partners, homeless providers, law enforcement, and elected officials – to testify against [HB 2430](#) at a hearing held by the House Welfare Reform Committee. [Two dozen bill opponents](#) presented evidence that homelessness is an affordable housing problem and that

criminal records present barriers to finding permanent affordable housing. Advocates also explained that providers are already seeing negative effects from a similar law in Missouri and argued that people in Kansas are best suited to finding solutions to homelessness in the state. Kansas advocates also coordinated proactive legislator meetings, community tours, and events when the legislature was not in session. Ultimately, the bill was stalled in committee.

Court cases are another opportunity to combat Cicero's efforts to criminalize homelessness and divert resources away from housing first programs. **Missouri** lawmakers passed [HB 1606](#) in 2022, which banned camping, enacted penalties to communities who discouraged enforcement of it, and redirected permanent housing funds to temporary measures. The bill was later challenged on procedural grounds and was unanimously struck down by the State Supreme Court. Advocates partnered with the National Housing Law Center to submit an [amicus brief](#), arguing that the real problem is a lack of affordable housing, not the actions of unhoused individuals. Unfortunately, a similar bill, [SB 1336](#), was introduced in the Missouri legislature in 2024. Advocates are already organizing around defeating this new attempt to harm unhoused individuals in Missouri.

Both **Indiana** and **Iowa** had bills introduced in their current legislative sessions, neither of which seems to be moving forward in the legislative process.

What are the real solutions to homelessness?

[Criminalization does not end homelessness – it exacerbates it](#). The homelessness crisis exists because of the [severe shortage](#) of affordable, available, and accessible homes for people with the lowest incomes and the [increasing gap](#) between wages and the cost of housing. Without affordable options, 8 million extremely low-income renters pay more than half of their limited incomes on rent, leaving them with few resources to make ends meet and susceptible to crises that can lead to housing instability and homelessness. State and local policymakers must invest in [proven solutions to homelessness](#): providing individuals with immediate access to housing and voluntary supportive services. This approach is [backed](#) by [decades of research](#), learning, and bipartisan support.

State and local elected officials should help address unsheltered homelessness by:

- **Expanding or sustaining prevention tools**, including emergency rental assistance and renter protections, to keep renters stably housed and prevent evictions and homelessness.
- **Conducting proactive street outreach and engagement** to connect people to housing and resources that meet basic needs, as well as comprehensive health and behavioral health care and support services.
- **Ensuring immediate and easy access to shelters and other emergency options** by lowering barriers to entry, keeping shelters open 24/7, and eliminating sobriety and income requirements.
- **Providing rental assistance and eliminating barriers, such as accessing IDs and providing security deposits**, to help people living in encampments move directly into stable housing, using a Housing First approach. When permanent housing is not immediately available, use hotels as a temporary resource until permanent housing is available.
- **Increasing the development of supportive and other affordable housing** through zoning and land use reforms and targeting public resources to create deeply affordable rental homes.
- **Using harm reduction approaches when delivering services and leverage a wide range of community partners**, including the housing authority, the public health authority, healthcare providers, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, to deliver culturally competent services that meet a diverse set of needs. Possible services include trash pickup and needle exchanges at encampments, street medicine, and housing focused street outreach.
- **Enacting civil and human rights protections** for people experiencing homelessness, including prohibiting criminalization, an approach that does not solve homelessness and creates more barriers to housing.