

Should the City of McMinnville Adopt a Homeless Bill of Rights?

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Abstract

This paper looks at whether the City of McMinnville should adopt a Homeless Bill of Rights. It begins with background information, including a definition of keywords, a brief history of homelessness and the number of homeless people in Yamhill County and explains what a Homeless Bill of Rights is. The paper explores how communities view and treat the homeless. Next, there is a discussion about how communities criminalize the homeless and how a Homeless Bill of Rights can change that. This discourse also examines the cost of criminalization, in terms of money as well as its possible negative impact on a community. The paper presents an argument in support of a homeless rights bill and concludes by saying that while the homeless in McMinnville need the protection of such a bill, it should be enacted at the state, rather than at the city level.

Introduction

In Indianapolis, there is a statue of the biblical character Jesus, portrayed as a homeless man sleeping, undisturbed, on a park bench on the grounds of Roberts Park United Methodist Church. His face and body are completely wrapped up in a blanket, but the crucifixion wounds on his feet, which are sticking out from under the blanket, confirm his identity. Wei-Huan Chen and Jorges Dorantes (2015) report the sculpture has caused much debate in Indianapolis. The church's staff says that the statue's presence is meant to "ignite" discussion about homelessness. And it has. The conversation is an important one because a lot of people look at homelessness from a "not in my backyard," or NIMBY, point of view. Howie Harkema (2018) gave a local example of this. He said that on occasion a homeless person on Third Street might be off his or her medication and shout at the moon or curse on a corner. When that happens, he said townspeople and the business community say, "Boy, that's a disturbance! How dare the homeless come to McMinnville and do such a thing on our award-winning street?" Further, Harkema said that a lot of people in McMinnville will not even look into the face of a homeless person. An observation at The Soup Kitchen at St. Barnabas (2018) showed why people may feel uncomfortable around the homeless. The clothes of many diners were dingy and dirty and quite a few had disheveled hair and looked as if they needed a shower.

The focus of this paper will be to examine whether the city of McMinnville should adopt a Homeless Bill of Rights to protect the human and civil rights of its unhoused population. It will begin with background information such as the definition of keywords and a brief history of homelessness in the U.S. It will also include information from the most recent homeless count in Yamhill County. Following that, the essay will define what a Homeless Bill of Rights is. After that is a section on how communities treat the homeless. That will be followed by examples of

how communities try to solve the problem of homelessness by creating laws targeting the homeless. There will be a discussion about how such laws criminalize the unhoused community and how a Homeless Bill of Rights can change that. The paper will also look at the cost of criminalization, both in terms of money and its negative impact on a city. After that, there will be an argument in support of a Homeless Bill of Rights. The essay will conclude by saying that a Homeless Bill of Rights is needed to protect the rights of the homeless in McMinnville, but that such legislation should be done at the state, rather than at the city level.

Background

In her book, “Working with Homeless and Vulnerable People,” Jeanette Schiff (2015) defined home as a place that provides a feeling of belonging, a place of comfort and secure shelter. Michele Wakin (2014) wrote in her book, “Otherwise Homeless,” that a home can be an RV or other vehicle. McMinnville resident Ed Doughty (2018) has lived in his Jeep for several years and said that he considers it his home. Schiff (2015) said that homelessness is defined by what one does not have. It means not having shelter and not having a sense of belonging or a place of comfort and secure shelter. She said that to be homeless means living in a place that holds no promise of being a permanent home.

Wakin (2014) said that in the early 1900s people considered homelessness a venturesome way of living. However, few would describe it that way today. Back then, people were called “hobos” and they could easily find a bed in a flophouse or at a cheap hotel. Peter Edelman (2017) said in his book “Not a Crime to Be Poor: The Criminalization of Poverty in America,” that there are several factors that brought about modern homelessness. Mental hospitals closed but adequate community mental health services did not follow. In addition, he said that there used to be single occupancy rooms for rent in hotels and at the YMCA. He said that business and

housing developments pushed the cheap overnight lodging out. He also said that affordable housing began to disappear during the Reagan administration. Beginning in the 1980s, programs for the poor were cut back, factories closed and good paying jobs for those who had less than a high school education became difficult to find. At the same time, the cost of housing went up and out of reach of those working the lower wage jobs that people without a high school diploma often have. Wakin (2014) said that homelessness continues to grow as does the diversity of people found among them. Alejandro Lazo (2017) reports that Ben Carlson, U.S. Secretary of Housing and Development, agrees. Carlson said that rent is increasing faster than people's paychecks. Carlson said the result is that more people are living on the streets and in homeless shelters.

Every two years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development mandates that states conduct a count of the homeless. It is called the Point-in-Time Count and takes place during the last week of January. In its latest report, Oregon Housing and Community Services (2017) said that the number of homeless people living in the state has increased by 777, or 8 percent since 2015. Yamhill Community Action Partnership (2017) reported that the number of sheltered, unsheltered and precariously housed in Yamhill County alone was 1,066. (Precariously housed means a person who "couch surfs," that is, moves from place to place staying in other people's homes.) Of the 1,066 homeless, the majority of them are split between the towns of McMinnville and Newberg.

The numbers show there is a substantial number of people whose rights would be protected with a Homeless Bill of Rights, also known as a Right to Rest Act. Such a bill is a law, ordinance or legislation, at city or state level, which specifically protects the rights of the unhoused population. Paul Boden, executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project,

and Terry Messman (2015), editor of the Street Spirit newspaper, which gives a voice to the homeless, said a homeless rights bill protects the right to be and move in public places without fear of discrimination; the right to rest in public; the right to shelter oneself from the elements; the right to accept, give and eat food anywhere that food is allowed; and the right to be in a car or any other motor vehicle that is legally parked. The American Civil Liberties Union (2017) said that a homeless rights bill also prohibits discrimination against a person based solely on his or her housing status. Edelman (2017) reported that Rhode Island, Illinois, Connecticut and Puerto Rico have passed such legislation.

How the Homeless are Treated

To understand why a bill is needed to protect the rights of the homeless, it is important to understand how the unhoused are treated. Eric Tars (2018), senior attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in Washington, D.C., said his organization studied 187 cities across the U.S. over a 10-year period and found that most cities have laws that prevent the homeless from performing basic life necessities in public, such as eating, resting, sleeping and urinating, without fear of being cited. The American Civil Liberties Union (2017) reported that there are 224 laws in 69 cities in Oregon alone that affect the rights of the homeless. The organization specifically mentioned sitting, loitering, panhandling and car camping laws. A local example of that is an RV parking ordinance that the McMinnville city council passed April 10, 2018. The ordinance prevents people from living in their vehicles on city streets—even if they have nowhere else to sleep. Further, Kaye Sawyer (2018), executive director of the Yamhill County Gospel Rescue Mission, said that downtown business owners can sign paperwork in advance that authorizes the police department to tell those who sit, rest or sleep in front of their businesses to move on. This means that the homeless cannot take shelter in the store's alcoves

during inclement weather, even at night when the business is closed. Sawyer also said that if people sleep in city parks, police officers will wake them up and tell them to leave. In addition, homeless advocate Howie Harkema (2018) said that those who urinate in a public place are sometimes ticketed and fined, even though the city does not have public restroom facilities available 24 hours a day.

Communities' Approach to the Problem of Homelessness

Communities often see new laws as the solution to the problem of homelessness. However, Tars (2018) said that those laws are a crutch. They are used to avoid dealing with the real problems associated with homelessness. He explained that there are people in every city who think their town is especially appealing to the homeless. He said they think they need to make their town a miserable place for the unhoused, so they will move on to another city. He called such attempts a city's "race to the bottom."

There are many examples of how cities "solve" the problem of homelessness, but most are not real solutions. Tori Richards (2018) reported that Orange County, California shut down a homeless encampment just a few miles away from Disneyland. She said the city is clearing out the camps because they do not want land that is "for the area's residents" to be used by the homeless.

Howard Fine (2016) reported that business and property owners in Los Angeles' Skid Row area and beyond complained that homeless encampments are spreading and that there is an increase in crime. Fine reported that businesses and the police department blame the increase on civil rights lawsuits, which reversed a city law that addressed encampments. Homeless people are now allowed to keep their tents up 24 hours a day. Joe Palazzolo and Alejandro Lazzo (2016)

reported that business owners in Denver, Berkeley and Portland work with city councils to create and enforce laws that target the homeless.

Likewise, Rebecca Nathanson (2017) reported that the city of Denver is trying to rid its city of the homeless problems by passing laws. In 2005, the city made it illegal to sit or lie down in any public right of way. Nathanson said that the city has continued creating laws that target the homeless ever since. By 2012, the city had banned camping on public property and prohibited any kind of shelter other than clothing. Similarly, a small group of residents in McMinnville complained to the police department about people living in RVs near their neighborhoods. They said that the RV dwellers' garbage and dogs were causing quality of life issues that could affect the value of their houses and property if allowed to continue. That resulted in the city council asking the police department to look into an ordinance that would ban people from living in vehicles (City of McMinnville, 2018).

Not everything cities are doing to combat homelessness is ineffective. David Green and John Peterson (2017) reported that Everett, Washington, city workers are clearing out homeless camps in parks, but they are also offering the displaced campers help by sending out a team, which includes two social workers, to help connect them with programs and services in the community. However, this approach to homelessness is a rare exception to how most cities approach homelessness.

In general, emotions run strong and situations can quickly escalate when it comes to the topic of what to do about homelessness in a community. Jack Healy (2017) reported that citizens at a Seattle City Hall hearing in October 2016 shouted for a recall of council member Mike O'Brien because he proposed allowing a homeless camp in the city for those who have nowhere else to sleep. Lorelei Laird (2014) said that cities get entangled in civil rights disputes when they

try and deal with a growing homeless population by creating laws that target them. She said that cities are being taken to court to defend their actions, as in *Lavan v. City of Los Angeles*. In that case, the Ninth Circuit Court found that removing and destroying homeless people's possessions violated the Fourth and 14th Amendments. Laird also reported that in the 2006 court case, *Jones v. Los Angeles*, the Ninth Circuit Court said it is cruel and unusual punishment to criminalize people for sleeping on sidewalks at night.

Criminalization of the Homeless

To explain how the homeless are criminalized, Tars (2018) used the following example: In the morning, a typical American gets up, uses the bathroom, prepares food, sits down to eat it and then leaves home for the day, knowing that when he or she returns home, his or her belongings will still be there. If the person gets tired during the day, he or she will sit down on a chair. If the person is a politician, he or she can even ask complete strangers for money and no one will think a thing of it. However, Tars said that if a homeless person does these same things in public, it can result in criminal charges. In a street newspaper published by the homeless advocacy group Real Change, Ashley Archibald (2018) asked, "Where do people go when they're told to leave?" She said that activities like sitting down, eating and resting are easy for most people, but that such life sustaining activities are more difficult for those who are homeless. Archibald also said that the standards for the homeless are different from those who have a home.

Boden and Messman (2015) reported that a survey conducted by Western Regional Advocacy Project, involving 1,298 homeless people, found that 81 percent had been harassed, cited or arrested for sleeping, 77 percent for sitting or lying down in a public place, and 66 percent for loitering, that is, standing around. The ACLU (2017) reported that Oregon has 125

camping laws, 48 sitting and/or loitering laws, 31 bans on vehicular camping and 20 panhandling laws. All target the homeless.

There are many examples of how the homeless and other poor people are criminalized. In his book, Edelman (2017) told the story of Vera Cheeks, who received a \$135 ticket. She did not have money to pay her fine, so she explained to a judge that she was caring for her dying father and was unemployed. The judge gave her 90 days of “probation” to pay her fine. However, that meant an additional \$132 to cover the fee levied against those on probation. She had to sign a paper and agree to the new fine amount—or go to jail for five days. Another example, from the ACLU (2017), is Ibrahim’s story. He said that homeless people cannot sleep, or even rest in the parks in Portland. He said he has been awakened repeatedly in the night and told to move on. Healy (2017) cites the example of Randy Russell in Denver, who was ticketed by police when city workers came to clear out the homeless encampment he lived in. He said that he and the other campers had nowhere else to sleep. An example closer to home is McMinnville’s new ordinance, which makes it illegal for people to live in vehicles parked on city streets. Nicole Montesano (2018) reported in the Yamhill Valley News-Register that Remy Drabkin was the only city council member to oppose the ban. Drabkin said that disallowing camping in vehicles in public places amounts to criminalizing people because they are poor. As a side note, Doughty (2018), who sleeps in his Jeep is not affected by the ordinance because he parks his car in a friend’s driveway. However, most of those living in their vehicles are criminalized by the ordinance because there is nowhere in McMinnville they can legally park.

Such criminalization makes it harder for people to escape homelessness. Harkema (2018) explained that when the homeless are repeatedly ticketed they are eventually arrested. While in jail, he said that their income stops and upon release they must reapply for many benefits and

that requires ID. He said that many of the people he works with have either lost their ID or had it stolen. In Oregon, an original copy of a birth certificate is needed to get a state ID card. But Harkema said that most of the homeless do not have one and that if they apply for one they do not have an address to have it sent to. Tars (2017) said that criminalizing people for life-sustaining functions creates barriers that prevent them from escaping homelessness because it is harder to find housing and employment with a criminal record.

What a Homeless Bill of Rights Does

How can a Homeless Bill of Rights help the unhoused community in McMinnville? There are several ways. First, it protects the human and civil rights of the homeless and it can cause the housed population to re-examine their prejudices against the homeless. Sara Rankin (2015) said that the housed population tends to view the unhoused as subhuman. She said that rights bills educate and increase understanding about the way communities treat the homeless. Rankin also said that such laws are an important first step in defining rights. The ACLU (2017) said that homeless rights bills are the first part of changing the way people view the homeless. Another important effect of homeless rights laws is that they make a way for people to take legal and civic actions when their rights are denied. William Lee (2018) reported on an example of this. He said that Amie Smith and Shawn Moore, a homeless couple in Chicago, filed suit against the city in January after the city repeatedly forced them to move their tent and directed city employees to throw away their personal possessions. Lee said that they filed suit based on the provisions of the Illinois Bill of Rights for the Homeless that was passed in 2013. The suit is one of three filed since the bill became law.

Further, the ACLU (2017) said that such bills provide the basis for repealing laws that violate the rights of the homeless. The organization said that such a bill would help advocates

repeal an Oregon law that says cities cannot have more than two campgrounds that serve as transitional housing for the homeless. It would also enable advocates to argue for the repeal of a state law that prohibits religious organizations from allowing more than three vehicles that are used as housing on their property. Locally, such a bill would provide a way for the homeless to fight back against McMinnville's newly passed ordinance that bans vehicular living.

The Cost of Criminalization

While laws targeting the homeless may seem to be a quick and effective way to deal with the problem of homelessness, they are not. The laws cost communities a lot of money—and time. In addition, the “race to the bottom,” by creating more laws that target the homeless than neighboring cities, at best only moves the problem of homelessness to a different town. Also, such laws can be in violation of the Constitution. In his article on homeless rights battles in cities, Healy (2015) cited a 2015 statement of interest the Justice Department issued. It warned that laws criminalizing homelessness may violate the Eighth Amendment as cruel and unusual punishment. Therefore, cities can end up facing lawsuits. Rebecca Nathanson (2017) reported on an example of this. She said that in 2016, Denver police removed homeless camps along a sidewalk. In the process, they took personal possessions, including people's blankets. The event was captured on video and is being used in a class-action lawsuit that says Fourth and 14th Amendment Rights were violated. The suit represents anyone who was homeless in Denver after 2014 and had their belongings taken by the police. It is estimated to be 3,000 to 5,000 people.

Another consideration is that cities run the risk of being out of compliance with federal law. For example, the largest disability rights group in the U.S., Disability Rights California (2017), announced in a press release that disabled individuals, along with other homeless people, have filed a class-action suit against the city of San Diego because of its ban on RV and

vehicular camping. The group is represented by the disability rights' group, the Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and two other organizations. All say that the ban is not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Another reason that criminalizing homeless is not an easy “fix” to the problem of homelessness is that it is not cost effective. Tars (2018) said that laws targeting the homeless result in tickets and fines that homeless people cannot pay so they end up in jail, which costs cities about \$75-\$125 a day. He said that most people are in jail for at least a week, which is equal to a month's rent in many cities. Therefore, laws targeting the homeless may cause an increase in crime, because, as explained earlier, being in jail can cause a disruption in income, making them more likely to steal or sell drugs to survive.

An Argument for a Homeless Bill of Rights

A Homeless Bill of Rights is needed to protect the rights of the homeless in McMinnville, but should it be done at the city level? Tars (2018) said no. He said that passing such laws at the city level may help start the momentum for legislation at the state level, but he said it is far better for states to initiate and pass such bills. He said that is because state bills effectively level the playing field of all cities in the state, which puts an end to cities “race to the bottom.” Oregon Democrat Sen. Lew Frederick (2018), agreed. Frederick was a sponsor of a 2017 homeless rights bill called the Oregon Right to Rest Act that did not make it out of committee. He said that a statewide approach to protecting the rights of the homeless would give a stronger sense of rights to cities that want to “go overboard” with laws. Likewise, Harkema (2018) said that homeless rights laws need to be passed at the state level, but for other reasons. He said that the city's mayor takes a “we're going to look into this” approach to dealing with the problem of homelessness. He said that the city creates great task forces and sub-committees—but does not

act on their recommendations. He said if a Homeless Bill of Rights is passed at the state level, its effects will trickle down to McMinnville but without the top-to-bottom scenario, the city will not embrace laws to protect the rights of the homeless.

Another argument in favor of a Homeless Bill of Rights at the state level is that it would not be dependent on a majority vote of council members. When the city council voted on McMinnville's RV and vehicular parking ordinance, only member Drabkin was concerned enough about homeless rights to vote against the ordinance.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, a Homeless Bill of Rights is needed to protect the human and civil rights of the homeless in McMinnville. Such legislation is, as Sen. Frederick (2018) said, “a step in the direction of helping folks”—instead of criminalizing them. However, such a bill should not be adopted by the city of McMinnville. Rather, it should be passed at the state level. That way, the legislation would apply to all Oregon cities equally. Such a law would prompt McMinnville to come up with real solutions to problems related to homelessness, including finding a way to make public restrooms available 24 hours a day and providing a legal way for those who live in their vehicles to park. Of course, the problem of homelessness in McMinnville will never be solved completely. The Jesus portrayed in the Indianapolis sculpture is reported to have said, “The poor you will always have with you.” However, such words are not an excuse for inaction regarding the rights of the homeless. Jesus was also said to be an advocate for the down and out—even when they looked and smelled different.

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Author Note

To say that I was not looking forward to taking this class would be an understatement. I dreaded it. Like other students, I put the class off until I had reached the place where I could not advance in my journalism and media studies major without taking it. In preparation for the class, I cleared my schedule of all volunteer work and explained to my family that I would be buried in school work for a few months. And I was. But was the class worth it? Yes.

Yes, because more than anything else, it confirmed that I enjoy writing. Yes, because it made me a stronger writer. Yes, because I learned about the way that the homeless are treated unjustly. Yes, because I have new research skills that will help me in future classes. Yes, because I discovered the thrill of interviewing people who are passionate about a cause. Yes, because I forged working relationships with classmates who will graduate a year or two before I do, so I have a small network of people to reach out to when I re-enter the workforce. And yes, because of the tremendous feeling of accomplishment I have because I tackled what seemed at the onset a giant that I was not strong enough—or smart enough to conquer.

While it was hard work, I can honestly say that I enjoyed the research for this paper. It taught me so much about the rights of the homeless, which is a topic I had previously not given any thought. It was important to me that I research a topic that meant something to me for this class. Because taking the class meant a few months of totally dedicating myself to my studies, I wanted to do something important enough to make it worthwhile. At first, it was difficult to find information about my topic and I was frustrated that we could not use material more than 5 years old. The turning point in my research was when I looked carefully through the notes and references in a book about RV and vehicular living. Though the book focused on one subset of the homeless, I found words and phrases that I could use to search the library's database. Even

then, the first sources I found were still too old to use, but eventually, as I delved deeper, I found a wealth of articles. From there, it was easy to find institutional sources. Finding government sources was still a bit more challenging. Finding a second book was the most difficult part of my research. I ended up using the first book I found at the beginning of the semester for my topic proposal. Looking back, I can understand why the instructors wanted us to use newer sources: I would not have discovered the newer sources if I had been allowed to use the older ones.

The interviews were my favorite part of the class. Though I enjoyed the face-to-face interviews, the ones I conducted over the phone yielded the most information. In fact, I think that my in-person interviews would have gone better if I had warmed up with some phone interviews first. The last phone interview I did was with a state senator and it went exceptionally well. After so many other interviews, I had eliminated unnecessary questions, which made for effective use of the senator's time. He was a reliable source of information, but by the time the interview was scheduled, canceled and then rescheduled I had already written my two required policymaker annotations and almost completed the rough draft for my outline. As a result, I was not able to include much the senator had to say. However, he confirmed what others had said and the interview was still a good learning experience for me.

A bit of advice I would give to upcoming Info Gathering students is to clear your schedule as much as possible for the semester. Though it is only a 200-level class, it is highly challenging. You will be swamped with writing when there are other things you would rather be doing. However, to make it through the class you will need to say no to some activities and spend extra time studying. However, I can assure you, at the end of the semester, you will find it was worth it. There is no way to describe how incredible it feels to print out 100 pages of text that have come from your own "pen." Another piece of advice is to try and get your papers

turned in at least a day ahead of time. It will help you feel more in control. Also, reach out to classmates. You might want to create a Facebook page as our class did, so you can ask questions of the group and spur each other on.

My classmates were amazing. Though I am old enough to be their grandmothers, they treated me as an equal. I appreciated that. It never felt awkward to be so much older. I have a great deal of respect for each one of them and their dedication to the class. In particular, Griffin Yerian was an encouragement to me. We rarely talked outside of class, and he struggled with the class as well, but he always assured me that I could do it. He patiently answered my questions and taught me new organization skills that will continue to help me in future classes.

I want to thank my instructors, Dr. Brad Thompson and Linfield's library director Susan Whyte for teaching the class. Both are highly knowledgeable, and I learned a great deal during the semester. I must admit that being so close in age to the instructors felt a little awkward at first. However, Dr. Thompson taught my orientation class at the college, so I already knew that he was a dedicated teacher that really wants to see his students succeed—even old ones. His sharp editor's eye helped me become a stronger writer. Going over our papers on the overhead in class was a bit uncomfortable at first, but it was an effective way to learn the mechanics of writing and it became a part of the class I looked forward to each Monday. Since the class had no textbook, the sample papers that Susan left out for students to look over were extremely useful to me. I do not think I would have done well without the samples. Her availability to answer questions, in person and by email, was also of major help. In addition, Susan's cheery purple penned comments on my assignments were encouraging. With all that I learned from both instructors, I know that I am well prepared for future writing assignments in other classes.

Others I would like to recognize are my husband, Vern, and teenage sons, Tony and Mickey. I know that I was not always a lot of fun to be around the last few months. But they never complained, even though taking the class meant fewer date nights for my husband as well as my absence at my sons' out of town wrestling matches and track meets. During the semester, they ate a lot of packaged and frozen meals and more than once my sons had to dig a wrestling or track uniform out of the dirty laundry basket because I had forgotten to do the laundry—again.

Another key person I want to thank is my sister and proofreader, Holly Ojeda. She has a busy life, teaching fitness classes during the week and working on projects around her house on the weekends, but she still made the time look over my papers after I had edited them myself. She did so without complaint, and without pay, though I did offer! She caught silly and serious mistakes I had missed and pointed out when there were gaps in what I was trying to say. Her notes, interspersed with humorous comments, made me laugh more than cry and I owe her a great deal of chocolate for her efforts.