

YWCA IS ON A MISSION

Monday July 25, 2016

Dear Mayor Soglin, Madison Common Council Alders, Members of the Public Safety Review Committee, Members of the Equal Opportunities Commission, and Members of the Homeless Issues Committee,

The YWCA opposes the proposed legislation prohibiting individuals from lying down or sleeping on public sidewalks in the Downtown Madison during daytime hours. We ask Mayor Soglin to withdraw this proposal. Alternatively, we ask *each* of the committees and the city council to vote it down.

Madison's homeless population is growing. With that growth comes more challenges for our city: More people seeking affordable housing, more people seeking job skills and employment, more people needing access to health care and, unfortunately, more people living outside – some of whom cause problems for the public. At the YWCA Madison we work with homeless individuals every day, and my staff and I know firsthand the challenges of working with this population.

However, solutions to homelessness do not come from restricting our fellow Madisonian's access to public spaces. Where else should they go? And we know that criminalizing homelessness—through issuing fines and threatening jail time—does not actually remove these problems. It makes no sense to assess fines upon individuals already facing dire poverty. With nowhere else to go, and no money to pay for fines, this ordinance will at best be push individuals further into poverty and at worst subject people to incarceration for being homeless.

It is also our understanding that the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development will be evaluating municipalities' criminalization of homelessness as a determining factor for future funding. Applicants for federal funding will be asked what actions they have taken to decriminalize homelessness, including implementing of new policies and plans to ensure homeless individuals are not punished. This ordinance, if passed, would be directly at odds with the new HUD guidelines.

To be clear, if this ordinance becomes law, Madison will be compromising our competitiveness for essential federal HUD funding that we rely on to combat homelessness, creating even more barriers to addressing our community's significant needs.

Additionally, this proposal only addresses sleeping in downtown spaces. The result, therefore, would push already unstable individuals and families into the shadows and into the suburbs of this city. Not only does this proposal offer displacement of homeless individuals instead of a solution to homelessness, it will make it harder for outreach workers and service providers to locate, connect, and support these families and individuals.

We know homelessness is not the fault of the city. Our city government is being forced to do more with less, and it is impossible for you to fund all the services needed in our city. However, punitive criminalization is not the solution. Rather, we need to provide funding and resources for affordable housing, daytime and evening shelter, and medical treatment. We need to eliminate obstacles to obtaining essential needs, such as adopting the housing-first model and eliminating restrictions on access to shelter. We know leaders at the City of Madison are already leading the way to making these changes, and we commend and support your efforts.

If this letter feels like *deja vu*, it is. We made a very similar request last August when Mayor Soglin proposed to ban individuals from occupying public benches in the downtown Madison. That proposal was rejected, and we ask that this one be as well. Please withdraw or vote down this proposal.

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Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or Carousel Bayrd, our Policy and Partnership Coordinator, at (608) 395-2196.



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