

NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

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July 30, 2008

William Breakey, M.D.
Chair
Johns Hopkins University

Letter to the Editor
Philadelphia Inquirer

Vasiliki Tsaganos
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Jacobson LLP

Dear Editor:

It is very disappointing to see recent police action following the suggestions of last week's article series that called for a law enforcement response to homeless persons in Rittenhouse Square.

Jeannette Austin
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The July 25 article, "Philadelphia more tolerant of homeless than other cities," points to cities like Las Vegas, Dallas, and Orlando to provide examples of how other cities approach the issue of homelessness. What the article does not highlight is that these cities with "harder line" approaches have been sued for those very laws and policies. While lawsuits in Orlando and Dallas are still pending, a Las Vegas law prohibiting sharing food with "indigent" people in public parks was found unconstitutional by a federal court. Philadelphia should not aspire to join the list of cities that are sued over unconstitutional policies toward homeless persons.

Roderick DeArment
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Howard Godnick
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Kirsten Johnson-Obey
Freddie Mac

Pamela Malester
Community Volunteer

When homeless persons have no other place to conduct life-sustaining activities, penalizing them for doing so in public is not only unconstitutional but inhumane. Even setting aside the moral reasons for not pursuing this approach, a law enforcement response to homelessness wastes law enforcement resources and costs more than productive approaches. In a 2004 nine-city survey of jail and permanent supportive housing costs, jail costs were two to three times higher than permanent supportive housing costs. Cycling people in and out of jail will not end homelessness, but providing housing will. Fortunately, Police Commissioner Ramsey has publicly stated that arresting people for being homeless is not the answer.

Cary Martin
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Tashena Middleton Moore
Jones Day

Margaret Pfeiffer
Sullivan & Cromwell LLP

Jeffrey Simes
Goodwin Procter LLP

Angela Ward
Community Volunteer

Instead of criminalizing some of our most vulnerable neighbors for behavior that is not criminal in nature, the City should continue to seek out real solutions to homelessness. While Mayor Nutter's development of 700 new housing units may not be enough to solve homelessness in the city, it is a step in the right direction. The City should use that momentum to continue to find solutions to homelessness. For years, Philadelphia's unique approach to homelessness has made it a model promoted around the country for other cities to follow. It would be a shame if it gave up this leadership role and followed the example of so many cities that only exacerbate the problem through the ineffective and counterproductive use of the law enforcement resources.

Sincerely,

Maria Foscarinis
President
Executive Director

Maria Foscarinis
Executive Director

Affiliations for
identification purposes only

Tulin Ozdeger
Civil Rights Director