

First Homeless Bill of Rights sets example for other states

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STREET NEWS SERVICE

Rhode Island's governor is expected to sign into law the first "Homeless Bill of Rights" in the United States as early as next week, formally banning discrimination against homeless people and affirming their equal access to jobs, housing and services.

The legislation, which won final Senate approval on Wednesday, bucks a national trend among municipalities toward outlawing behaviors associated with homelessness such as eating, sleeping and panhandling in public spaces.

Among other steps, the Rhode Island law would guarantee homeless people the right to use public sidewalks, parks and transportation as well as public buildings, like anyone else "without discrimination on the basis of his or her housing status."

It guarantees a "reasonable expectation of privacy" with respect to personal belongings similar to that of people who have homes.

While other laws already guarantee many of the rights specified in this legislation, supporters say it was necessary due to widespread discrimination.

"I think we've set the bar high in the U.S. for homeless people, and I'm very proud of that," said Senator John Tassoni, a sponsor of the bill.

Roughly 643,000 people are homeless on any given night in the United States, experts say.

"It's important as a standalone piece of legislation but also as it's juxtaposed with other communities that are in the process of criminalizing homelessness," said Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

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Cities including Philadelphia, San Francisco and St. Louis recently passed ordinances targeting the homeless or have stepped up enforcement of existing regulations.

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A report in April from the White House's Interagency Council on Homelessness noted a "proliferation of local measures to criminalize 'acts of living'" such as sitting, standing or asking for money in public places.

"You're just looked down on because you're carrying your life on your back," said

John Joyce of Providence, who was homeless for three years and now is co-director of the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project.

Portland has a camping ban in place, and enforces a sidewalk management ordinance in place that prohibits people from sitting or lying on portions of downtown sidewalks.

Frank Nolan, 53, of Providence became homeless last year when a ruptured appendix left him with \$30,000 in hospital bills and he did not have medical insurance.

Nolan said he used the addresses of friends on job applications because he knew he would not be hired if his address was a homeless shelter.

He said he was stunned when a bus driver failed to stop for him and three other homeless men waiting near a shelter. "He pulled up and looked at us and he knew we were homeless," said Nolan. He just waved and he drove off."

In Philadelphia, an ordinance took effect on June 1 banning charities from feeding homeless people in public places such as parks.

In St. Louis, Missouri, police evicted homeless people from a site leased for them by a local minister after the city cleared out three homeless encampments along the Mississippi River.

Last year, San Francisco began enforcing a ban on sitting and lying on sidewalks between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m., with violators facing tickets of up to \$500. But San Jose recently said it would order police to stop throwing away the personal possessions of homeless people seized during sweeps of homeless camps, amid criticism from homeless advocates.

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attention and sympathetic concern for their own priorities, and efforts to integrate these into a broader movement of mutual support. Like the kinds of efforts you mention.

S.K.: *Speaking of broader movements, in some of your past talks you have been critical of the overly narrow focus of social justice organizing. I would imagine the Boston area alone has dozens of little social justice organizations. It could be, for example, housing justice initiatives, promoting solidarity with people in Latin America, countering the influence of the military in public schools, or any number of issues. But how effective can they be on their own? Should they be forming alliances with more broadly based social change movements like OWS?*

N.C.: I don't recall being critical of the narrow focus in itself. It is often well justified. But the atomization that is so prevalent in the society as a whole is harmful to individual movements, which could benefit greatly from participation in a common enterprise with many complementary facets. That is why for many years — many decades in fact — there have been efforts to create broader regional or even national and international coalitions. It hasn't been easy, but it is clearly desirable. There's a good reason, for example, why unions are called "internationals," even though the term is much more of an aspiration than a functioning reality, as it should be, for the benefit of all.

S.K.: *Last month you went to Harvard to address a gathering of Boston-area OWS activists. Don't you find it odd that the 99 percent movement gathered at the university of the 1 percent?*

N.C.: In most countries meetings can be held at union halls — like when I talked in London a few months ago. Not here. The main functioning institutions are churches and universities, so meetings are commonly held there. I agree with you that there could have been a better venue. I suppose there were reasons for selecting that one.

S.K.: *In the 1980s, Harvard was seen as a sort of scholarly refuge by Indonesian and Guatemalan generals. More recently, Georgetown gave a faculty position — Distinguished Scholar in the Practice of Global Leadership — to former Colombian*

president Alvaro Uribe, despite his horrendous human rights record. What do universities stand to gain or lose from such alliances?

N.C.: It was a refuge, as you say, and that gave an opportunity to activists. I was involved in both the Indonesian and Guatemalan cases (Lumintang, Gramajo). Harvard was keeping it secret, but I learned about it from activists in Indonesia and Guatemala, and groups here were able to organize very effective protests that drove Lumintang out of the country (one of my favorite ever Boston Globe headlines was "Indonesian general flees Boston") and properly shamed Harvard. Alan Nairn, a wonderful person with a flair for the dramatic, waited for the Harvard commencement, and when Gramajo came up for his diploma, raced down the aisle in front of the TV cameras and handed him a subpoena — the State Department quickly got him out of the country. I was part of the Uribe protest too, but that time the protest didn't prevent the appointment, though it had its effects.

The U.S. supported all of these gangsters, handsomely. So not surprising that Harvard joins in to reward them in its own way.

S.K.: *Lawrence Woods, a political scientist, conducted a survey a few years ago to see how often your writings are cited in undergraduate International Relations textbooks. From 1992 to 1999 only 8 percent of the texts contained citations of your work (and that's including one extended footnote). A follow-up study looking at texts published between 2001 and 2004 didn't turn up a single citation. How does this square with your reputation as the "most-cited living author"?*

N.C.: I'm amazed there it was even 8 percent. And I suspect if you checked, you'd find it was mostly condemnations. What else would you expect? How often do you think Howard Zinn, or other critics of U.S. foreign policy, are mentioned? Sometimes, it's truly scandalous. Gabriel Kolko's pioneering work on the early Cold War is almost never cited in scholarly journals, though plenty of scholars crib from his insights. The "reputation" is based on some survey of social science literature put out by the MIT PR office. Maybe accurate, maybe not, but not of the slightest significance.

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