

Small step for our bill, giant leap for our human rights

BY ERIC ARES, DILARA YARBROUGH AND PAUL BODEN
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On April 23, the California State Assembly Judiciary Committee passed Assembly Bill 5, also known as the Homeless Person's Bill of Rights and Fairness Act, out of committee with a 7-2 vote. More than just a legislative procedure, the vote was the latest victory for a growing national movement of people and organizations committed to ending the criminalization of homelessness and poverty in cities and regions across the country.

Throughout the history of the United States, discriminatory laws have stripped the most marginalized populations in our society of their constitutional rights. And time and time again, it has taken the work of those dedicated to equality and justice to challenge and end these threats to our civil liberties. So while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended Jim Crow segregation, it is important for us to remember that it took the organizing and sacrifice of thousands of freedom fighters to force legislators to act on these landmark pieces of legislation.

This is why a Homeless Bill of Rights is needed now more than ever. Multiple economic recessions and the shredding of our social safety net programs have led municipalities to pass laws that punish, rather than help, the most vulnerable in our society. Today, homeless people all over the United States are cited, arrested and jailed just for being without housing. Sleeping, sitting, standing – these are life sustaining activities and fundamental human rights that are denied to the homeless.

However, last year Rhode Island passed the first Homeless Bill of Rights. And now there are campaigns to pass similar laws underway in Oregon, Vermont, Connecticut, Missouri and California. These bills reflect a growing dissatisfaction with the current strategy of criminalization that fails to address growing economic disparities and

inevitably results in human rights abuses. California's Homeless Person's Bill of Rights and Fairness Act demands that the State of California differentiate between criminal acts that a person might commit (regardless of housing status) and life-sustaining acts we all perform but that become criminal

offenses for those without housing.

But laws like this do not happen on their own. They take the dedication and coordinated efforts of a movement. A Homeless Bill of Rights is more than just a law protecting the rights of the economically

disenfranchised. It underscores our desperate need in this country to once and for all create a society where all people are valued and treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. It speaks against our age-old pattern of laws that are used to coerce, to humiliate or dehumanize. A Homeless Bill of Rights reconfirms rights that we all know should exist, and at the same time it allows those who are experiencing homelessness to stand against the structural violence that they are experiencing.

In addition, when these laws are passed – when police and criminalization are no longer used as de facto solutions to the "problem" of homelessness – maybe then we can start to focus on the real solution to homelessness: housing. We need the Department of Housing and Urban Development budgets returned to their pre-Reagan levels. We need to stop the systematic dismantling of public housing. We need a commitment to the human right to housing. However, these goals cannot be attained if we keep allowing police to force homeless people into hiding – under our bridges, into the shadows of our alleys – or remove homeless people from visibility through arrest.

AB 5 is now continuing through the legislative process. It sits in the Appropriations Committee and will hopefully make its way to the full California State Assembly next month. The movement has thousands behind it, led by the Western Regional Advocacy Project, its member organizations and their partners. We will be there every step of the way until we see the Homeless Bill of Rights become a reality.

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