

Statehouse testimony stresses right to rest, survive



Grace Badik is Street Roots' program assistant and Jesuit volunteer.



Paul Boden is the executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project, which is made up of community organizations including Street Roots and Right 2 Survive.

**BY GRACE BADIK
AND PAUL BODEN**
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

House keys, not handcuffs! House keys, not handcuffs! Chants and songs rang loud from the Capitol steps on a warm Thursday afternoon in Salem. Advocates, housed and unhoused, traveled from across the state and beyond to voice their support of Senate Bill 629, the Right to Rest Act.

A group of about 40 people arrived March 12 for the public hearing held by the Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood to give personal testimony on what they see as criminalization of an act of survival — that is, to be able to rest.

After the rally, people went into the Senate committee chambers and signed up to testify for SB 629 in front of the five-person committee chaired by Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Chip Shields, D-Portland. In all, 26 testimonies were heard, including 22 in support of the Right to Rest Act and three in opposition, and a representative of a law enforcement association who said they would “most likely” be neutral if the bill protects all people, not just homeless people — a correction to the bill’s language that the proponents want as well.

“The reason people are in public places is because they have nowhere else to go,” Amber Dunks of Right 2 Survive told the committee. “In Portland alone there are

more than 2,000 people sleeping outside because there are only a few hundred shelter beds available. Most of the people out there, if they had a place to go, they would go there. They don’t want to be out there. They are out there because they have no choice.”

Amber was one of three opening speakers who had experienced homelessness. They represented the homeless community, service providers and the sponsoring organization of Right to Rest.

The opposition claimed that SB 629 would do more harm than good. Giving people experiencing homelessness the right to rest would incentivize them to maintain their lifestyle, opponents said.

One of the most passionate opposition came from Sharon Konopa, the mayor of Albany, a city that has 11 municipal codes criminalizing poverty or human existence in outside spaces, second behind Ashland, which has 13 such codes. In her testimony, she decried SB 629 as “a hindrance to move (people experiencing homelessness) towards self-sufficiency and into housing.” She said resources should be geared toward housing and social services.

Representatives from the League of Oregon Cities and the Portland Business Alliance expressed similar sentiments.

However, this bill is not solely about the decriminalization of homelessness. At the heart of it, SB 629 gets at the lack of

affordable housing that produces the mass contemporary homelessness we see today.

Supporters of SB 629 don’t disagree with Konopa that “every citizen should have a real dwelling,” but until that is ensured, we cannot criminalize people for doing what they need to do to survive. A consistent theme throughout all of the testimony, regardless of whether it was for or against, was the need for affordable housing. No one testifying in favor of the bill said this was the solution to end homelessness, only that it was a necessary step to help people get out of homelessness and poverty.

What is the point of all of this testimony? For those who testified in support, including Street Roots, we wanted to emphasize that sleeping and resting are universal needs for survival. Whether you are housed or not, you have to sleep, eat and rest.

The mix of personal and professional testimonies left an impression on the committee. In closing the testimony, Gelser, the committee chair, said, “This really was some of the most moving and compelling testimony that I’ve heard during my time in the Legislature.”

How could it not be when it was coming from people who know what’s like to be criminalized for sleeping?

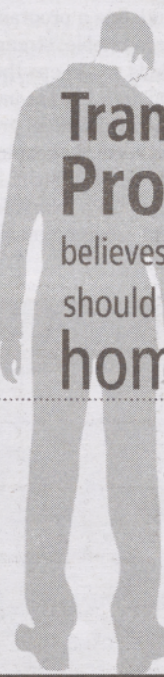
The Right to Rest bill will next be heard in a working session of the same committee, where the vote to move forward will take place. Check the WRAP website, www.wrapphome.org, for updates and campaign materials.



Kristina Wright | Real Estate Agent
Bellmoore Realty
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