



June 8, 2023

Re: Opposition to Agenda Item 23-0673 regarding camping

To the La Crosse City Council:

I am writing to state Couleecap's opposition to proposed changes to the ordinance concerning camping on public property. The proposed changes will not only be ineffective at addressing homelessness but will be counterproductive to our efforts to house people who are currently without.

Couleecap shares many of the community's concerns about people sleeping outdoors and in city parks. The lack of affordable housing, healthcare, and other resources has left many of our neighbors with no other option. Living outdoors can be dangerous and unhealthy for those forced to do so and places strain on our emergency response and other community resources.

As a supportive housing provider for more than 35 years, Couleecap works to provide housing and supportive case management to people currently living outdoors. In fact, Couleecap operated the first "Housing First" program in the state. This model works by relying on the private rental market. So, we speak from experience when we say that ordinances like the one being considered only exacerbate the issue and make it more difficult to move people into housing.

A 'nuisance housing' citation can quickly escalate to an arrest warrant, criminal history, and increasing fees and penalties if left unpaid. This produces insurmountable barriers to housing, jobs, and other opportunities for people to become financially and housing stable, leading to continued homelessness. These tactics also push people to seek spaces that may conflict with local business owners and property owners, or may require people to seek housing with others, risking that host's housing due to lease violations.

Mayor Reynolds and his administration recently joined forces with La Crosse County to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to address homelessness. In a presentation to the City Council earlier this week, city and county officials outlined a pathway to 'functional homeless zero'. Increased enforcement and the criminalization of homelessness was not presented as part of their plan. The proposed ordinance changes contradict that plan, undermining the city-county initiative and the efforts by nonprofit organizations working to move people to housing.

Please vote 'no' on proposed changes to nuisance camping ordinances and, instead, work on building solutions that enable people to enter and be successful in their housing. Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Hetti Brown  
Executive Director

