



Independent Living Resources
4439 Mormon Coulee Road
La Crosse, WI 54601
(608) 787-1111

To whom it may concern:

The intent of this letter is to provide opposition to the proposed amendment of Subsection 22-5. I have worked as a Homeless Outreach Specialist with Independent Living Resources for just over two and a half years, and through this work, I have developed many relationships with unsheltered citizens in the La Crosse community. My work as an outreach worker can include, but is not limited to, assisting with helping individuals access the Coordinated Entry System, helping individuals access medical care, assisting individuals with locating and maintaining stability in permanent, sustainable and affordable housing, providing resources in the realm of harm reduction, and working in depth in a one on one setting with unsheltered citizens to assist them in achieving any goals they establish for themselves. I feel as though the proposed ordinance, as it stands currently and if passed, would directly criminalize homelessness, and discriminate against individuals living with disabilities who are unable to access shelter due to their disabilities.

Similar laws have been challenged nationally as unfairly punishing individuals who have no options for shelter. For example, in the 2019 *Martin v. Boise* case which was regarding camping in public spaces, it was ruled by the 9th District Court that cities cannot enforce anti-camping ordinances if the community does not have enough shelter beds available to meet needs. This holds true for La Crosse – our numbers of unsheltered individuals are substantially higher than what shelter beds we do have.

When we talk about homelessness in our area, we often discuss barriers. Barriers can be things like a lack of income, an eviction, or things on a person's criminal record. Being outside without a stable place to stay is also a significant barrier. When we look towards finding solutions that work to assist with ending homelessness, the elimination of barriers that prevent individuals from accessing housing is always on the table of topics to discuss doing better about. If the Council does move forward with passing this amendment, this means that people will be ticketed simply for trying to find a place to sleep when there is nowhere else to go. As most unsheltered people have extremely limited or no income, tickets would remain unpaid and this would ultimately lead to items on people's records that could then be used to deny them for housing opportunities by landlords and rental companies. The proposed amendment does not address the core causes of homelessness and it would only create more barriers, worsening the challenges that individuals face in looking for sustainable housing and potentially creating additional trauma on some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

In addition, it is no secret that individuals living with a disability have a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness, and it is also no secret that an extremely high percentage of our current unsheltered population are living with disabilities. Nationally, it is estimated that at least 40% of individuals experiencing chronic or extended homelessness are living with a disability. In La Crosse, we are extremely limited in shelter space. Our area's current shelter system has multiple barriers for people living with disabilities, and many individuals have shared stories with the Outreach team of being denied entry into a shelter due to having a disability and the perception that the shelter would not be able to accommodate their needs. People within this

Website: www.ilresources.org • **E-Mail:** advocacy@ilresources.org • **FAX:** (608) 787-1114
TDD/TTY: (608) 787-1148 • **Toll Free Voice:** (888) 474-5745 • **Toll Free TTY:** (888) 378-2198





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population would be directly and disproportionately affected by this amendment if it passes. As the amendment stands right now, a situation where someone cannot access shelter based upon their disability would then be ticketed and criminalized for being in a public space. It is my belief that this amendment, if passed, could create a substantial disproportionality of individuals with disabilities being fined and ticketed for sleeping outdoors. This could be perceived as being discriminatory against individuals with disabilities, as they would be at higher risk of receiving a citation because they could not access the same resources that someone without a disability was able to access.

In addition, there are many concerning factors about this amendment and how it would be equally enforced to all populations and the message that it sends regarding providing support to our unsheltered community members. Many communities who begin enacting legislation that targets unsheltered individuals enact further legislation limiting the rights of those who are unsheltered in order to discourage them from congregating in parks or shared public spaces. For instance, many communities have begun making it illegal to provide food and supplies to unsheltered individuals in a city park or anywhere except a designated shelter. It is also unclear how the amendment would be equally enforced across our community- could someone napping on the beach or a family lingering after a picnic too long in a park be found in violation? If not, why not? Expanding the definition of what constitutes camping in our parks must be applied unilaterally to all community members in order to be fair and equitable.

I ask all members of City Council to look towards the negative impacts this would have on our community and vote no against this amendment. There are much better ways to assist this population, and that begins with building knowledge, being open minded to learn about struggles you may not have any personal connection to, and treating all citizens, regardless of their housing status, with not only dignity and respect, but by resisting legislation that unfairly penalizes the most vulnerable members of our community. I implore all of you to vote no on this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Fitzpatrick".

Michael Fitzpatrick
Homeless Outreach Specialist
Independent Living Resources

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