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#277689 | March 15, 2021

Testimony to **Portland City Council** on the **Shelter to Housing Continuum Project, Recommended Draft**

I urge a NO vote on this. We should not allow the “temporary siting of shelters in parks and open space.” We should not expand where shelters are allowed under this proposal—rather, we should expand shelters into commercial spaces downtown where the services are concentrated and where businesses are vacating real estate space. We should not allow clients to stay longer than 30 days in short-term shelters which are not fit for lengthy stays. We should never sanction “outdoor village-style shelters”. We certainly should not sanction these living situations, which are not fit for any human being, anywhere, let alone in residential areas where families and school-aged children are living. “Outdoor shelter models” are not shelters and are not humane. We should not conscript our parks and our schools into this inhumane model, which is not a solution and instead sanctions untreated mental illness and drug addiction and allows that to spill into our communities unfettered. Broadening where people can camp does nothing to reduce the people living on our streets. I am an attorney with immediate and extended family members who are homeless and suffering from addiction and severe mental illness. I have lived here for thirty years and have seen this city sink into horrific decline. I also work downtown. I have an intimate understanding of the crisis of homelessness, addiction, and mental health issues that are endemic to our country and to this city, in particular. It's a crisis, no doubt. However, this proposal abdicates good governance and moral leadership at a time when it is so severely needed. If this passes, it is an indication that this city is willfully refusing to adequately and compassionately care for its unhoused population and would rather see them camp outdoors and in derelict RVs. If we have any respect for the lives of human beings, we cannot allow them to pitch tents in schools and parks. That is not a humane solution. It is the antithesis of recognizing the dignity inherent in all human beings, particularly the dignity inherent in our most vulnerable citizens—the citizens whom this proposal pretends to help. This is a city in a first world country, but you would never know it from this proposal. Furthermore, a growing number of tent cities, garbage, human feces, and used needles being sanctioned in parks, schools, and residential areas is not the solution. This is not a dignified solution for the city's most vulnerable residents, nor is it a solution for the cities housed residents, who form its tax base. I believe that our housed residents are willing to shoulder the expenses of meaningful solutions that are aimed at the root causes of homelessness. But I refuse to support proposals that simply allow and sanction the expansion of the problem, such as this. Moving tents from downtown to school playgrounds and parks, and broadening the areas in which homeless people can camp does nothing to address the root causes of homelessness. This proposal does not fundamentally what is already

happening on an already-large scale throughout this city: a scourge of our residents living in sub-humane conditions that resemble the third world hellscape like the vertical slum nicknamed the "Tower of David" in Caracas. The city should be focused on investing and building badly needed housing projects in areas where homeless people can readily access services: downtown. We are in a unique moment in downtown Portland where many businesses have vacated or are not renewing their leases. Allowing people to suffer, be it in parks, vehicles, tents, or city-sanctioned encampments, is not a solution. Real solutions demand real governance and concrete action plans that get our most vulnerable out of the elements and into mental health and drug treatment facilities. For any policy to work in addressing homelessness, it must get people successfully housed, fit their needs, and offer dignity. Besides housing in vacant commercial buildings near the myriad services downtown, I also support a partnership program to investigate whether homeless people have families in the area or elsewhere and to work to reunite them with their families. If they do not have family in Portland, I support bus or airplane vouchers to get homeless people to their families. Our city leaders should consult with mental health and drug treatment experts and expand the definitions of conservatorship. As someone who has immediate homeless family members suffering from addiction and mental illness, I know that these conditions make them unwilling or blinded by their illnesses and addiction to the extent that they do not recognize the necessity of going indoors, obtaining treatment, and/or getting access to the medication that they so desperately need. If we are to arrive at real solutions, we must recognize that housing is only one piece of the solution to this complex crisis. Even if the city took my advice to house our homeless citizens in the deserted commercial spaces downtown, many (if not most of them) will not want to stay there--they will want to stay on the streets. We used to have a system in place for treatment of the chronically mentally ill, which was dismantled, in part, by politicians such as Ronald Reagan and there were no provisions given to patients pouring out of mental health institutions that once housed them. Those of us who are old enough to remember "deinstitutionalization" know that is what started the spiral into this crisis. Our city leaders should work with mental health and drug treatment professionals to change the criteria for conservatorships so that those who are unable to care for themselves and their medical needs, e.g., people with schizophrenia, can be treated more like patients with dementia. This proposal does nothing to address the severe, overwhelming, and chronic needs of our housing-resistant population (our homeless residents who refuse services, shelter, and treatment). I was present at an Arlington Club meeting where Mayor Wheeler was asked to address the homeless problem in Laurelhurst Park. My recollection is that, according to Mayor Wheeler, most of the homeless in Laurelhurst Park were resistant to being housed in shelters and refused assistance. Many of our homeless citizens are likely suffering from anosognosia, also called "lack of insight," which is a symptom of severe mental illness experienced by some that impairs a person's ability to understand and perceive their illness. It is the single largest reason why people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder refuse medications or do not seek treatment. Without awareness of the illness, refusing treatment appears rational, no matter how clear the need for treatment might be to others. The compassionate solution to this crisis requires that we mandate both mental health and addiction treatment for those who are unable to manage their lives. We must recognize that living in a tent is

“rock bottom”. Life has become unmanageable for our citizens living in tents and encampments. We must grapple with this reality and deal with it head on. If we do not, we condemn them to a life of suffering and, ultimately, death. Many of us have parents and relatives struggling with dementia. If we left them on the streets, we would be considered cruel and we would be liable. These same symptoms of anosognosia are present in our housing-resistant population of homelessness citizens. Dementia is a terminal disease. Mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and diseases like drug addiction are treatable. If we do not intervene in a meaningful way, we are condemning our citizens to a terminal illness and standing idly by, knowing that the course of these diseases can be changed dramatically with intervention. This proposal does not triage our homeless citizens in the way that is so desperately needed. Nothing is lower functioning than not being able to house yourself. As most of you know, severe drug addiction causes people to dismiss their priorities such as family, work, food, and--yes--shelter and to prioritize their addictions. The drive to use totally and completely dismantles and overtakes rational thought. Addiction treatment should be mandated, and medicated assisted treatment should be funded and offered universally. Current laws must be revised to address these issues. This proposal is aimed at people who are housing-resistant and it does absolutely nothing to meaningfully assist them. Housing-resistant populations are simply incapable of helping themselves and cannot make informed decisions about their own personal well-being. They need significant supervision and assistance providing appropriate treatment and care. They are not able to provide treatment and care for themselves—they cannot even provide themselves the very basic hierarchical needs of shelter and sanitation, let alone treatment for mental illness and the disease of addiction, raging out of control. Without changing legislation to allow for conservatorships, families are left desperate, begging for help to get their homeless loved one out of zombie RVs and encampments so that they can take care of them and prevent them from dying in the most inhumane way possible. I favor wrap around and comprehensive services that include a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a medical doctor, a social worker, a drug counselor, a vocational rehab therapist, and an occupational therapist. These services must be condensed downtown, where most of them are already located. They should not be scattered even further throughout the city, as this proposal recommends. If we scatter these services throughout the city, the ability to provide wrap around services—which currently appears impossible, given the already-expanding number of tent cities--will be even more difficult. We need to triage our most vulnerable. We need to start treating all the psychiatric illnesses and addiction diseases that our homeless citizens are suffering from. Our most vulnerable citizens' problems are not going to disappear if we sanction these inhumane forms of "housing" that somehow pass as compassion in this city. If we are not motivating our citizens to get better, we condemn them to die. To the extent that our homeless population is not in the throes of mental illness or drug addiction, we should refuse to sanction squalid living conditions that this proposal aims to promote and fortify. There is commercial space available downtown that would likely be rented to the city for a deep discount, given the flight of business from the downtown core. Many of us have learned that we can work from home instead of commuting to downtown. It will be no surprise when businesses refuse to renew their leases. This will free up even further space to house our homeless residents and provide them with transitional services that will assist with

permanent housing and employment. These services are already located downtown, so the services would be in close proximity to those who need them. As a parent, I would be remiss if I did not add the fact that the city's sanctioning of tent cities is destroying the psyche of our city's children. When we refuse to treat our most vulnerable citizens with dignity and humanity by housing and serving them and instead expand zombie RVs, tent cities, and encampments into our children's schools, parks, and neighborhoods, what does that say about how little this city values human life and human dignity? The idea that these tent cities should be expanded is something that should be rejected outright. Furthermore, schools should remain solely as sacrosanct places of learning and should not be contorted to mean "housing." There should be nothing safer than schools and school playgrounds. Because I work downtown, my children (under ten years old) have already watched a nude man walk around with an erect penis. They have watched people shoot up. They have watched people defecate and urinate in the doorways of my commercial building and parking lot, even though there are red city port-a-potties in walking distance. They have been screamed and leered at by people suffering from substance abuse and/or mental illness. Children shouldn't have to witness those things anywhere. But the idea that they should be witnessing them in walking distance of their own homes or at school and that we should sanction that in the name of "humanity" is ludicrous.

Testimony is presented without formatting.