



April 3, 2023

**Re: Testimony in opposition of Senate Bill 2018: Relating to the prohibitions on camping in a public place.**

Submitted by:

Mark Smith

The Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County  
2000 Crawford St, Suite 7000  
Houston, TX 77002

Chairman Bettencourt and members of the Committee:

The Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County is the lead agency for the homeless response system of the City of Houston as well as Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties. This system, known as The Way Home, is comprised of more than 100 nonprofits, faith-based organizations, domestic violence service organizations, veterans service organizations, and local government agencies. Since 2011, The Way Home and its member organizations have been able to decrease homelessness from 8,471 persons in 2011 to 3,223 in 2022 according to the annual Point In Time Homeless Count and Survey. This decrease of 64% places our community as a national leader in addressing homelessness and has been recognized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the New York Times, and many other publications and national organizations.

In the last two years alone since the start of the COVID19 pandemic. Our community has:

- **Invested \$165 million** through the City of Houston, Harris County, the State of Texas, and private philanthropy to address homelessness through the COVID Community Housing Program (CCHP)
- **Served more than 12,500 people** from October 2020, when CCHP was launched, through February 2023 by helping those experiencing homelessness to enter housing or quickly diverting those at risk of imminent homelessness back into housing.
- **Decommissioned 71 encampments** with 428 of the 472 people living at these encampments going into housing or self-resolving, a **90% success rate**.

We oppose this legislation for the following reasons:

1. As illustrated by the data provided above, our community has developed and implemented a strategy to address encampments that has not only been effective locally but has been lauded as a national best practice by HUD, with cities across the nation reaching out to learn from our community.
2. This legislation proposes to increase enforcement of the state camping ban and create additional requirements for establishing a designated location for people experiencing homelessness to camp with services to be provided at these locations. As explained above, our community already has an existing strategy in place that has proven



effective in addressing encampments, providing services, and helping people experiencing homelessness to return to housing. This proposed legislation would represent an unnecessary burden and could disrupt the already effective work being done in our community. Additionally, the requirements of this legislation would represent a significant and potentially untenable financial cost on local entities, creating an unfunded mandate from the state on local entities that are already constrained by limited financial resources.

3. The proposed legislation also requires a local entity to develop and implement a process for a person to file a complaint regarding public camping. Our community has already developed and is piloting a system by which residents can send a report to outreach providers about encampments and people experiencing homelessness. This system is meant to assist outreach providers in gathering data about encampments and deploy teams appropriately. The development of a state-mandated public complaint system could lead to an undue expectation that services will be provided to people experiencing homelessness immediately, an impossibility for most communities across the state given limited resources and could create unsafe situations of individual citizens taking it upon themselves to police encampments and harass people experiencing homelessness.

4. The proposed legislation creates the condition whereby a local entity could be designated as a “violating local entity.” Additionally, this legislation prohibits the Comptroller of Public Accounts of the State of Texas from sending to that entity its share of the Sales and Use taxes. The method by which a local entity receives this critical designation is unclear and determining an entity’s effectiveness in addressing encampments through public complaints is unreliable and not likely to reflect the actual effectiveness of local homeless services. Additionally, withholding state sales and use taxes will only further exacerbate financial constraints for those local entities that currently lack sufficient resources to address homelessness.

Our community acknowledges that encampments represent a significant public health hazard especially for the people who live there. However, the measures proposed in this bill will not result in a benefit to the homeless population or the communities in which they reside. It instead has the potential to aggravate existing stressors on an already-spread thin homelessness response system. We ask the Committee to instead focus its’ efforts on creating additional resources for local entities to invest in services, housing, and existing strategies that have been proven to be effective.

Sincerely,

Mark Smith  
Director of Strategic Planning  
Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County  
2000 Crawford, Ste. 700  
Houston, TX 77002