



NC COALITION^{to} end HOMELESSNESS

On June 28, 2024, SCOTUS voted in favor of Grants Pass, Oregon, and opened the door for more municipalities across the US to ticket, fine, and jail people experiencing homelessness for doing something that every human being must do to survive – sleep. Legal experts suggest the case hinged on whether people experiencing homelessness could appeal to the US Constitution as legal protection against ordinances that prevent them from sleeping or camping in public spaces when shelter is not available in their communities. In this case, SCOTUS denied the plaintiffs protection from cruel and unusual punishment as stated in the 8th Amendment. In recent years, public parks and other thoroughfares in the small town of Grants Pass, Oregon – like many places in our nation – have become more crowded by homeless people setting up tents or simply choosing a vacant spot to lie down and sleep.

We've seen the same trends in rural and urban communities right here where we live. For instance, the 2024 Point-In-Time Count for the North Carolina Balance of State Continuum of Care identified a significant increase in the number of people living unsheltered in 79 of the 100 counties in NC. Of the 4,180 people included in the 2024 PIT Count, 2,127 (51%) of them were unsheltered, meaning they were living in places not intended for human habitation, e.g., outside, in tents, or in their cars. In 2023, the unsheltered count was 1314. So in a year, one CoC in NC experienced a whopping 62% increase of people living unsheltered. While this increase was partly due to improved outreach methods and tools, we cannot overlook the reality of other factors that increase housing instability and homelessness. Soaring costs for rent, mortgages, insurance, food, fuel, and other necessities can create impossible financial situations for many citizens. Combine that reality with domestic violence, insufficient legal protection for renters, the lack of a housing wage, too few affordable housing units, and high-barrier shelter or transitional housing programs. We should not feign surprise when we see more and more people living outside, in parks, under bridges, along sidewalks, in tent communities.

But *Johnson v. Grants Pass* was not about societal surprise. It was about whether our highest court was willing to affirm the full humanity of people caught in the net of our cultural inequities and unable to find or maintain stable housing. It was about the perceived value of homeless people through the lens of the law. It was about whether being homeless, which is a status clearly defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, is a crime. Every person, regardless of status, must eat, drink, breathe, relieve themselves, and of course, sleep. Without shelter, where can homeless people perform these human activities with dignity, without harassment or degradation or punishment or shame? Under oath, local officials in Grants Pass admitted the town did not have enough beds in its sole shelter to accommodate the number of people who were homeless on any given night. They also conceded the ultimate goal of their ordinance against sleeping outside with a blanket or pillow is to get people living unsheltered to move along to another city. Grant Pass' refusal to find a humane solution to the humanitarian crisis in their community reveals the moral decay at the heart of this case. The SCOTUS decision gave them, and every other city ready to punish people for experiencing homelessness, the easy way out.

What a shame.

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There's much work to do.

In North Carolina, we must

1. Protect the basic human rights of all people, especially people who are experiencing homelessness because they are often overlooked, unheard, and underserved by opposing any municipal, county, or state ordinance like the one in Grants Pass,
2. Challenge our legislators to increase funding for services and allow local providers to use those resources to meet the unique needs in their areas,
3. Center people with living experience of homelessness to shape programs and processes that are equitable and accessible for everyone,
4. Collaborate across race, class, gender, party, and region to develop a united movement for housing justice in NC,
5. Advocate for a housing wage that will allow people to secure and maintain stable housing, and
6. Incentivize and increase affordable housing development.

Join us in the fight. Visit www.ncceh.org. Follow us on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

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