

Tacoma/Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

www.pchomeless.org

info@pchomeless.org



March 26, 2024

To: Tacoma City Council

RE: amici curiae/Grants Pass

Dear Mayor Woodard and Members of the Tacoma City Council

On April 22, 2024, the Supreme Court of the United States will begin reviewing the decision of the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, that municipalities are not allowed to make it a crime to sleep outside if no inside space is available. The Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness is opposed to criminalizing homelessness on both humanitarian and practical grounds. We agree with the City of Tacoma's assessment ([Homelessness Strategy 2022-2028](#)) that the rise in homelessness is occurring "largely as a result of population growth and low supply in the housing market." The strategy document goes on to say:

"Homelessness remains a central issue across Tacoma as the conditions that contribute to homelessness have continued to worsen due to the housing affordability crisis and the two pandemics of this time period, COVID-19, and racism."

Neither our low housing supply nor the other conditions cited in the Homeless Strategy will be solved by putting more people in jail or imposing fines on the poorest citizens in our city. The solution to homelessness is attainable housing for everyone.

As constituents of a progressive city, we are astounded to see that Tacoma signed on to the amici curiae in support of Grants Pass. Former City Attorney, William Fosbre signed the brief in our name as did the National League of Cities (NLC). Tacoma is a member of NLC and Mayor Victoria Woodards is the Immediate Past President of this organization. Constituents – particularly those most affected by the loss of protections – were not informed of these briefs put forward by our representatives and we were certainly not provided an opportunity for public comment.

The Grants Pass challenge tells us that municipalities will be able to "explore other tools in their legislative toolbox" if SCOTUS overrules protections that "handcuff local policymakers." If there is a solution that Tacoma has not tried due to the minimal protections guaranteed by the 9th Circuit, why haven't we heard about it?

There is no short-cut or easy solution to the problem of inadequate shelter and services for the most vulnerable people in our community. Criminalizing homelessness does not exempt us from the hard work of solving the underlying problems and providing access to the housing and services we all need.

A note about learning from experience:

The current City of Tacoma camping ban, with its stated goal of increasing safety and stability for all, is a failed experiment. The ban has resulted in reduced community stability and less effective interventions. Outreach workers lose contact with unsheltered people when they are moved from place to place in a pointless, repetitive cycle. People lose survival gear and connections with others with each move. Pierce County saw a 78% increase in the number of people who died while homeless in 2023 with 295 people being accounted for by the Pierce County Medical Examiner during last year – a time period that coincides with Tacoma’s implementation of the camping ban. In short, unhoused people are suffering and dying as a result of the City’s failed camping ban policy and its current enforcement. We acknowledge the increase in drug overdoses may help explain part of this increase, but we also know that some deaths could have been prevented if victims had not lost critical support networks as a direct result of displacement.

Support for Grants Pass v. Johnson is not only inconsistent with best practice, it is in direct opposition to the stated goals of Tacoma’s own strategy to address homelessness. Rescinding support for the Grants Pass petition is an important step toward walking the talk.

Sincerely,



Rob Huff

Tacoma/Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness