



## Senate Bill 484

### *Unhoused Individuals - Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense*

Position: OPPOSE

To: Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: Feb. 4, 2025

From: Chip Bertino, Worcester County Commissioner

Good afternoon Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher and committee members. I am Worcester County Commissioner Chip Bertino. I am here to express opposition to Senate Bill 484.

While this bill nobly attempts to provide additional rights to unhoused individuals, it simultaneously impinges on the public safety concerns of counties while limiting the responsibilities of law enforcement in their mission to protect and serve. Further it is yet another unfunded mandate imposed on local jurisdictions.

The bill preempts local policies while exposing counties to new liabilities and public health issues. It mandates the county taxpayers provide free housing for individuals and families indefinitely.

Local government should be empowered to handle this issue locally. In Worcester County, the Homeless Outreach Team, a multi-agency effort that includes the health department, law enforcement, medical professionals and social services, among other entities, worked since 2018 to support individuals. The team helps people get vital records needed for employment, provides mental health services and puts people in touch with shelters. The efforts of the team ensure homeless individuals in need are connected with appropriate resources and services. A county should do no less.

SB 484, in preventing criminal and civil citations, removes a county's ability to act when public health and safety are threatened. Counties will be susceptible to lawsuits, brought by the unhoused and the attorney general on what could be specious grounds and motivation.

Additionally, regardless of the jurisdiction, the bill will harm the tourism industry, as individuals might opt to stay in their vehicles rather than pay for hotel rooms. If we question them and they claim to have no housing, how are we to judge the veracity of their claims?

I urge you to provide this bill with an unfavorable report. If the legislature is convinced this bill does need to move forward, please consider tightening up the definitions and incorporating amendments that protect counties' ability to maintain safe public spaces for all citizens.