



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

March 11th, 2025
HB1164

Counties and Municipalities - Homelessness - Local Laws (Right to Rest Act)
Judiciary Committee
Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of **House Bill 1164**. The Maryland Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

The Maryland Catholic Conference supports **House Bill 1164**, which seeks to ensure that individuals experiencing homelessness are not penalized for the basic human need to rest when no alternative shelter is available.

The Catholic Church teaches that every person, created in the image and likeness of God and possesses an inviolable dignity that must be respected and protected. This dignity does not diminish in times of hardship or vulnerability, such as homelessness.

The *City of Grants Pass* case brought into sharp focus the plight of individuals who, through no fault of their own, lack access to shelter and face punishment for simply resting in public spaces. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in its amicus brief filed in April 2024, urged the Supreme Court to recognize that penalizing people for sleeping outdoors when no adequate shelter exists violates the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. Drawing on Catholic teaching, the USCCB emphasized that "human dignity requires access to basic shelter" and that criminalizing the status of homelessness fails to address the underlying causes of this crisis, instead compounding the suffering of the most vulnerable.

Following the Supreme Court's decision on June 28, 2024, which upheld the City of Grants Pass' ordinances and ruled that such penalties do not violate the Eighth Amendment, the USCCB issued a statement expressing profound concern. The bishops lamented that the ruling "permits local governments to impose fines and jail time on individuals who have no choice but to sleep outside due to a lack of accessible shelter." They underscored that this decision "does not align with the Church's call to uphold the dignity of every person" and warned that it risks "exacerbating the challenges faced by those already marginalized." The USCCB reiterated its commitment to advocating for policies that provide meaningful solutions—such as affordable housing and support services—rather than punitive measures that deepen despair.

House Bill 1164 aligns with this vision. It reflects the Catholic principle of the common good, which calls us to create conditions that allow all members of society to flourish. Criminalizing rest does not solve homelessness; it punishes a symptom while ignoring the root causes—rising housing costs, insufficient shelter capacity, and systemic inequalities. As the USCCB noted in its amicus brief, “the Church has long recognized the moral imperative to care for the poor and homeless,” drawing on the example of Jesus, who had “no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Legislation that protects individuals from penalties for resting in public spaces when no alternative exists is a concrete step toward honoring this imperative.

Moreover, such legislation is a matter of justice. The USCCB’s brief highlighted the disproportionate impact of anti-camping ordinances on vulnerable populations, including youth, people of color, and those with mental health challenges—groups already bearing the weight of societal neglect. Punishing them for resting in public spaces, when they have nowhere else to go, is not only unjust but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty and exclusion. **House Bill 1164** would offer a compassionate alternative, ensuring that our legal system does not further harm those whom society has failed to adequately support.

From a practical standpoint, the USCCB’s post-decision statement emphasized that “fines and jail time do not address the homelessness crisis—they make it worse.” Criminal records and financial penalties hinder individuals’ ability to secure housing, employment, or stability, trapping them in a cycle of hardship. In contrast, **House Bill 1164** opens the door to dignity-affirming solutions, encouraging communities to invest in housing, mental health services, and job training rather than incarceration.

House Bill 1164 is an expression of mercy and justice, consistent with the Catholic call to see Christ in the face of the poor. The USCCB’s witness in *City of Grants Pass* reminds us that our laws should reflect “a preferential option for the poor,” prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable over punitive measures that offer no hope. Let us build a society where no one is punished for the basic act of resting but instead is met with compassion and the resources to reclaim their God-given dignity.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference urges a favorable report on **House Bill 1164**.