

MUTUAL AID MONTHLY

A Production of Des Moines Mutual Aid

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Criminalizing Homelessness

DSM City Council Aims to Punish Rather than Help Unhoused Citizens

Comrade Marshall Chrononaut

The Des Moines City Council is very close to adopting a new law criminalizing sleeping outdoors; in effect, criminalizing the state of being unhoused. When confronted about the cruelty of this measure, councilors Simonson, Coleman, and Boesen have no answers to the question of “where are unhoused folks supposed to sleep?” These same councilors will acknowledge that current facilities are inadequate and that even if run at full capacity, over half of the city’s unhoused population would still have to sleep outside. The council does not care. They seem to see the unhoused citizens as invaders, a problem to be driven out.

There are a range of low-cost options the city could take that would actually help the situation rather than punish the most unfortunate. For starters, the council could designate more “Safe Camp” sites around the city, places where unhoused folks could sleep safely without fear of harassment by cops. These Safe Camps could have adequate shower and restroom facilities and regular trash collection. The city could even use these Safe Camps as a place to distribute food and supplies, and could have case workers meet with individuals to help with things like getting new ID cards, securing medication, and applying for services like disability and veteran’s benefits.

The city will not do these things because the city is run by people who want the unhoused to disappear and blame them for the situation they are in. Capitalist dogma states that the poor are sinners who deserve poverty. It is therefore up to the community to do this work, and it is all the more difficult as the city criminalizes a state of being that the city itself is responsible for inflicting.



A SHELTER IS NOT A HOUSE



Shelters Are Not Houses

Shelters should be working to put themselves out of a job rather than focusing on expansion.

Comrade Jen

During a recent town hall on the further criminalization of homelessness in Des Moines, there was discussion about expanding the capacity of shelters for those who are unhoused. Shelters are inaccessible to many people for a variety of reasons, only one being overcrowding. The main reason why people who are sleeping outside report not wanting to stay in a shelter is a loss of dignity and self determination. These are both inalienable human rights and fundamental to living a fulfilling life.

Ultimately, the biggest problem with shelters is that they aren’t homes. In a Des Moines survey published in 2023, 150 out of 152 houseless neighbors said that safe, permanent housing was what they wanted. Despite that very clear answer, the survey resulted in a long list of “solutions,” divided into short, mid, and long term timelines. Some of those solutions included building warming shelters and expanding current shelters. Of the 10 “solutions,” only one was to create permanent affordable housing.

Every other solution is a band-aid. The only real solution to homelessness is to get people into reliable housing with access to food and healthcare. All of the energy, time, and money that is spent researching, funding, and implementing temporary “band-aid” solutions could be better spent getting people into houses. If you think this idea is unrealistic, I challenge you to dig into your imagination and dream bigger. The issue of homelessness is ultimately an issue of priorities that we have deemed acceptable as a society. The current state of affairs is unacceptable. We can and should do better for ourselves and our neighbors.

Hey, At Least It's Not a Felony...

Misdemeanors will fuck you up too

Subcomandante Ronnie

In the Iowa criminal system there are two types of charges: felonies and misdemeanors. Broadly speaking, felony convictions can result in five years to life in prison with fines ranging from \$1000 and up, misdemeanors are two years or less in a cage with fines starting at \$50.

Misdemeanors are less serious than felonies, it is true. Nevertheless, they can seriously impact your future permanently.

Let's look at the city's proposed criminalization of the homeless: the current proposal is to fine people sleeping outside \$50 with no jail time if the pigs decide that is all they are going to pursue at that moment.

\$50, no big deal, right? If the punishment is only a fine, then it is only a punishment to the poor. If that fine goes unpaid, you may get a warrant for your arrest and charged with contempt, causing more fines, maybe jail time. Since the original charge does not threaten jail time, you are not entitled to a public defender, which is another attack on the poor. There are ways to avoid the fine by filing financial affidavits proving you are unable to pay, but if you don't have a lawyer, how will you know when and how to do this? The courts and pigs aren't going to help you.

Further, having a criminal record can bar you from certain services like housing, many many jobs, social services, even getting an education. All things that can help someone get housed, that is short of bloody revolution redistributing the wealth and power from our enemies.

Criminalizing poverty creates a spiral straight towards deeper, longer term poverty and the increased violence and trauma that accompanies it.

It is designed this way.



This flyer is a production of Des Moines Mutual Aid, which is a local network of anarchists, communists, and socialists building community autonomy from capitalism and the state. Below are our points of unity - basically, the political and social outlook which binds us together.

o. We believe in working shoulder to shoulder and standing in solidarity with all oppressed communities. We ourselves are oppressed, and our mutual aid work is a fight for our collective liberation. We do not believe in a top-down model of charity. Instead, we contrast our efforts at horizontal mutual aid, the fostering of mutually beneficial relationships and communities, to dehumanizing and colonizing charity.

1. We believe in community autonomy. We believe that the communities we live and organize in have been largely excluded from state social services, but intensely surveilled and policed by the state repressive apparatus. Capitalism is fundamentally unable to meet people's needs. We want to build self-sustaining communities that are independent of the capitalist state, both materially and ideologically, and can resist its repression.

2. We are police and prison abolitionists. Abolition and the mutual aid that we practice are inextricably linked. We don't rely on capitalist institutions or the police to do our work. We believe in building strong and resilient communities which make police obsolete, including community systems of accountability and crisis intervention.

3. We work to raise the political consciousness of our communities. Part of political education is connecting people's lived experiences to a broader political perspective. Another component is working to ensure that people can meet their basic needs. It is difficult to organize for future liberation when someone is entrenched in day-to-day struggle.

4. We have open disagreements with each other about ideas and practices. We believe there is no formula for resolving our ideological differences other than working towards our common aims, engaging with each other in a comradely manner, and respecting one another, whether or not we can hash out disagreements in the process.

If you want to get involved, let a volunteer know. For more information, including how to donate, visit <https://iowamutualaid.org/>.