

National Coalition for the Homeless

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**Homeless Bill of Rights to be Signed by
Connecticut Governor, Bills Proposed Throughout
the United States**

In a show of bipartisanship, Connecticut's Legislature approved what promises to stand as a historic measure. The Homeless Bill of Rights, SB 896, passed on June 5th and will be signed by Governor Dannel Malloy's in a ceremony this Friday, August 9th. The bill aims to reaffirm homeless individuals' civil liberties and attempts to end discrimination by mandating their equal treatment.

In May, Illinois' Legislature passed a Homeless Bill of Rights, which awaits Governor Pat Quinn's signature. Upon each bill's approval, Illinois and Connecticut will join Rhode Island in becoming the second and third states with a Homeless Bill of Rights that confirms protections for people who are homeless in law. (Puerto Rico has also passed similar homeless civil rights legislation.)

The purpose of the Homeless Bill of Rights according to Nate Fox, a community organizer with Hands on Hartford, the Project Supervisor for Faces of Homelessness Speakers' Bureau, and a principal promoter of the CT bill's introduction and passage, is to "raise public awareness and create an institutional response" to the "deferential treatment and structural issues that... sustain homelessness." Fox hopes that the Homeless Bill of Rights will provide "recourse and accountability" if homeless individuals are subject to continued discrimination.

In response to the opposition, which deemed a Homeless Bill of Rights as giving people experiencing homelessness preferential treatment, Fox said "it is about people who have deficient rights and bringing them up to a level of equal rights."

The bill mandates that homeless individuals must receive equal treatment from police officers, such as having the right to be in public areas, free from unjust persecution. It also protects these individuals from being wrongfully denied employment and reestablishes their ability to vote, regardless of their residential status. The act further asserts homeless persons' right to emergency medical care, without discriminatory treatment, particularly based on their low income. Lastly, it affords a level of privacy and protection for people who stay in shelters, many of whom "lose civil liberties," such as the right to access their private property and personal records in shelters. Fox added that the Homeless Bill of Rights, "will reduce barriers that homeless people face [as well as] those inefficiencies that are created from injustice, not just a systemic lack of organization."

Rhode Island's bill, which was signed into law June 2012, helped to encourage efforts in Connecticut and Illinois, to move forward on similar pieces of legislation. Fox believes that expanding a Homeless Bill of Rights to every state "can and should be done." The progress in Rhode Island, Illinois, and Connecticut will "raise the public dialogue and change some of that apathy, stigma, and stereotyping" that promotes the cycle of homelessness, Fox commented.

Connecticut's bill, which was first introduced in the Senate where it passed by a margin of 30-3, and subsequently in the House by a vote of 109-34, will go into effect on October 1, 2013. "These bills are long overdue and we applaud the state legislatures in Connecticut and Illinois for taking action," said Jerry Jones, Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. "As a society, we often look away and pretend that people who are homeless are somehow different from us. Recognizing the basic rights and dignity of every person - homeless or housed - is a first step in grappling with the injustice of millions of people who have no place to call their own."

The National Coalition for the Homeless will continue to work with advocates from California, Oregon, Vermont, and Missouri on similar legislation in their home states. A Homeless Bill of Rights affirms a legislative commitment to social equality and demonstrates a nationwide, collaborative effort in ending homelessness.

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