

St. Louis homeless bills would perpetuate failed policies | Opinion

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St. Louis Alderwoman Alisha Sonnier is to file two bills, one that removes prohibitions on new homeless shelters across the city and an “Unhoused Bill of Rights” that guarantees the rights of the unhoused to live in public spaces and rights-of-way, supported by a network of publicly supported shelters and encampments.

The problem is these guarantees of the rights of the homeless, most not from the city of St. Louis, trample the rights of city neighborhoods to regulate neighborhood uses; undermine the city's adopted model for ending homelessness — housing first; and will generate a flood of homelessness into the city.

The central question is what the city's “goals” should be related to the unhoused, given our status as a high-poverty municipality with 10% of regional population? The answer is the city should direct its scarce resources to:

- Providing housing, not shelter
- To the city's homeless residents
- With the goal of dramatically decreasing the population of unhoused individuals in the city

Sonnier's bills satisfy none of these goals.

The bills reject housing first, the national best practices model, which focuses on “housing” as the solution to homelessness.

Instead, they favor long-term “shelter” as the solution to the unhoused population already living on the city's streets. The theory is if the city can support these individuals with shelter and encampments, then over time they can be coaxed from their lives on the streets. The problem is long-term shelter, a model that was discredited decades ago, doesn't reduce street homelessness. It grows it.

Most of those living on the streets, like those at the current City Hall encampment, are “chronically homeless.” These individuals, often fighting long-term demons, are very mobile via platforms like Megabus. When long-term shelter is prioritized as part of an ecosystem that supports life on the streets, the result is large numbers of chronically homeless individuals migrating to communities that offer these supports. This is precisely what happened when, pursuant to its 2005 10 Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness, the city

targeted resources at safe havens, shelter and close to 500 permanent supportive housing units to eradicate chronic homelessness. By 2015, the new units/beds were full and there were more chronically homeless individuals on the city's streets than 10 years before.

Also, these bills have no requirement that city resources be directed to city residents in need, instead establishing facilities and services available to anyone who is unhoused, regardless of where from. The City had a residency requirement through 2012, but it was discontinued largely because it was unenforced by service providers who preferred large, regional facilities located in the city. The creation of an Unhoused Bill of Rights in the city, but nowhere else in the region, will make permanent the regional practice of dumping the unhoused in the city.

The Rev. Philip Mangano, the federal homelessness czar from 2001-2009, recounted to me a conversation with the St. Louis county executive. Mangano begged him to accept \$10 million in annual federal homelessness funding to better serve St. Louis County's large, unhoused population. The county executive refused, transparently because he was content with exporting county homeless residents to the city. Taking funds would require developing additional services in the county, which would be political suicide.

The city's neighborhoods, already working to address a public safety crisis, can't afford the passage of these bills that will dramatically increase the number of chronically homeless individuals from all over the region and beyond living on city streets, and the massive negative externalities caused, without offering city neighborhoods rights to object or recourse when this experiment fails.