



Mayor Bynum  
City of Tulsa  
175 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> St.  
Tulsa, OK 74103

June 15, 2022

Dear Mayor Bynum,

We represent a coalition of cross-sector organizations in Tulsa who are deeply concerned by the proposed changes to Title 27, Chapter 12, Section 1206 of the Tulsa municipal code, pertaining to the obstruction of free passages. The citizens of Tulsa, the Tulsa philanthropic community, and our policy leaders, including you, have made great strides in addressing homelessness. Tulsa is not only a leader in our state but in our nation in our approaches to this issue. This proposed change in ordinance puts that momentum and progress at great risk.

Specifically, if passed into law, this amendment will result in individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness being fined, arrested, and jailed. This proposed change in ordinance represents an incredibly costly and risky non-solution, and to that end, we are asking you to withdraw this amendment from consideration until we have had a chance—as partners—to discuss evidence-based solutions instead of forcing the taxpayers of Tulsa to foot the bill for something that research has shown time and time again makes the problem worse.

- **This amendment will increase barriers to housing and critical services.** By pushing our unsheltered population further into Tulsa’s periphery, we push them farther from the very employment, healthcare, and housing services that seek to resolve this complex issue. Enforcement of this ordinance will destroy the hard-earned trust that we have collectively built with Tulsans experiencing homelessness. Charging someone criminally will make their journey out of homelessness harder. Criminal charges and jail time often disqualify individuals from housing options that would otherwise be available to them.
- **This amendment will disproportionately impact the most marginalized Tulsans.** The populations most overrepresented among Tulsans experiencing homelessness are people of color, individuals struggling with mental illness and disabilities, and veterans. You need to look no further than your own Equality Indicators Report to understand that this proposed amendment would be detrimental to the very populations your administration has focused so much energy on eliminating disparities and barriers for.
- **This amendment will be costly to tax-paying Tulsans.** Your administration was a key partner of this coalition along with many other community leaders in the creation of the A Way Home for Tulsa strategic plan, which prioritizes the use of evidence-based solutions to end homelessness in our community. Moving forward with this proposed change in the ordinance will cost taxpayers significantly more money in costs associated with citing, arresting, and jailing unsheltered Tulsans than funding the strategic plan would. It is inappropriate to ask Tulsans to foot the bill for this ordinance, the poor outcomes it will create, and the harm it will cause other Tulsans in need of housing and services.
- **This amendment will potentially expose Tulsa to costly legal action.** The U.S. Department of Justice issued an advisory in 2015 indicating that laws that criminalize homelessness in communities that lack adequate housing and shelter space are unconstitutional. Tulsa’s shelters are more than 400 beds short of being able to meet the needs of our unhoused population, and our housing programs are full. The constitutionality of this ordinance will not be determined by the amount of time or money the city has spent trying to resolve homelessness but by whether Tulsa has enough housing, which it does not. Based on that DOJ Advisory Opinion, the proposed change in ordinance is unconstitutional. For Tulsa to continue down this path is to commit to joining a long list of cities that have tried—and failed—to install similar ordinances and have paid a high price to do so.

Instead of pursuing a policy that will ultimately hurt Tulsans at the cost of Tulsans, we are asking you to consider using the time and resources that enforcing this policy and defending it in court will cost our community on proven alternatives including the strategies outlined in the City of Tulsa's Affordable Housing Strategy and the A Way Home for Tulsa Strategic Plan. One example could be to create a civilian-led mental health and street response team that will complement the State's efforts for a 988 crisis response system. Our coalition has outlined a proposal that would provide 24/7 mental health and street response coverage, based on similarly successful models from around the country, which will be shared with the City Council. This model has been proven to produce improved connections to shelter and services, reduce strain on public safety and criminal justice resources, and net significant long-term savings.

As a community, we need to collectively continue implementing all the priorities in the A Way Home for Tulsa Strategic Plan, such as preventing evictions, improving service coordination and delivery, and building more units of affordable housing. Our coalition of partners and our local philanthropic community is ready and willing to support alternative approaches. We strongly urge you to work with us on proven solutions that will make Tulsa a safer and healthier community.

Sincerely,

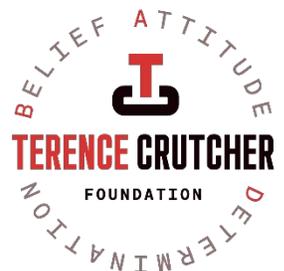
*Melanie Stewart, LCSW*  
AWAHT Chair

Melanie Stewart, Chair  
A Way Home for Tulsa

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