Public Statement from the Southern Oregon Coalition for Racial Equity in regards to Medford City Council's Recommendations to Change the Current Prohibited Camping Ordinance (5.257)

March 15, 2021

The Southern Oregon Coalition for Racial Equity is a group that is focused on creating a more equitable and accessible Southern Oregon through an anti-racist lens.

Because we believe that equity is for everyone, we cannot sit idly by and watch the Medford City Council pass such a cruel and inhumane ordinance that would disproportionately affect the unhoused community of Medford. We see this ordinance change as a blatant attack on this community and an attempt to push unhoused people out of the city of Medford instead of providing them with the services, shelter, and support they deserve under the veil of “fire safety.” Criminalizing poverty and homelessness does nothing for our community but further stigmatize, isolate, and threaten the health and safety of those engaging in life-sustaining activities—like camping in a tent during harsh winter weather.

Houselessness is not an individual problem. It is a systemic issue that has been exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 wildfires, skyrocketing rent rates, and a minimum wage that has not kept up with inflation. Criminalizing individuals for these issues while refusing to address the root problems is ineffective and immoral.

There have been several landmark cases through the federal court systems that have laid out the illegality of what is considered “cruel and unusual” punishment (e.g. Blake vs. Grants Pass). The ordinance changes suggested by Deputy Attorney Mitton will be considered illegal under these statutes and Medford will be a test ground for litigation. Is this truly how the taxpayers of Medford want to see their money spent? On another city lawsuit? Currently, FEMA is offering 100% reimbursement of emergency and temporary shelter for unhoused community members for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The city had originally encouraged unhoused individuals to shelter in place along the Greenway in order to protect them from the spread of COVID-19 and has now rescinded on this while offering no additional shelter beds to aid in this mass dispersion. The Medford City Council has absolutely no reason not to provide non-congregant shelter for unhoused community members at this time, yet they are opting to fine, arrest, and jail these vulnerable community members while there is an active COVID-19 outbreak at the county jail.

SOEquity is dedicated to creating an equitable Southern Oregon that treats all lives with dignity. It is in this vein that we are publicly opposing these changes to Medford City Ordinance 5.257 and want to announce our endorsement of Oregon House Bill 2367, also known as the Oregon Right to Rest Bill. We believe it is vital to support far-reaching legislation that will protect the health and safety of every Oregonian, regardless of their housing status.

Sources:
https://nlchp.org/supreme-court-martin-v-boise/
https://www.kdrv.com/content/news/Medford-City-Council-considers-revisions-to-prohibited-camping-ordinanc-573779291.html