

Talking points: The Cicero homeless encampment bill in North Carolina

Leaders from organizations across North Carolina—including veterans, local government, nonprofits, and faith-based—continue to elevate largely ignored concerns with NC General Assembly members about a statewide homeless encampment bill. Several other states have been here before us with similar legislation filed at the prodding of Joe Lonsdale—a tech-industry multibillionaire, venture capitalist, and Cicero Institute founder based in faraway Texas.

Cicero Action’s incursions in several state legislatures have shared one common objective: to criminalize homeless encampments. It has found bill sponsors and sent its contract lobbyists to testify in support of this “solution” to make homelessness less visible—even if it does nothing to address its growth. After the first bill was enacted in Texas, Cicero went on to peddle its state-sanctioned encampment model to other states, including Arizona, Missouri, Tennessee, Iowa, Georgia, Florida, Wisconsin, and Kentucky. Each bill had some variations, but their initial points and end goal had some common elements.

1. **Target local homeless services nonprofits with felony charges.**

Another Cicero template bill passed by the NC House would establish drug-free homeless service zones assigning responsibility and first-time penalties for operators of a *“facility-based service that primarily serves homeless individuals.”* A Class 1 misdemeanor could carry with it jail sentencing of less than a year, other non-jail supervision, or fines. Despite a letter signed by over 140 NC local leaders from across the state objecting to this provision (attached),

the penalty was upped to a Class H felony with stiffer punishment

guidelines in its first House Committee vote. Most recently, Cicero helped draft and file bills with similar intent: this year, in the states of Arizona and Iowa¹, where it was defeated; and last year in Florida, where it passed.

2. Unfunded mandates with increased liability for local governments.

Absent state fiscal support, the encampment bill could place a significant financial burden on taxpayers and increase homelessness by prioritizing policing over service and housing solutions. It diminishes local autonomy while making cities and counties both fiscally responsible and legally liable for the implementation of state-sanctioned encampment policies. Funding crisis-based institutions is not shown to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness, and the cycle of homelessness-arrest-jail-emergency care will continue to generate high public.

Excerpt from Letter to Iowa Senate Subcommittee RE S1195:

Increasing the use of policing, jails, psychiatric hospitalizations, and camping sweeps does not add up financially. Responding to encampments can cost upwards of \$8.56 million². Cities, counties, and states carry the cost burden since federal funding for homelessness cannot be used for policing or cleaning encampment locations.

¹ The [Iowa] bill's sponsor, Rep. Steven Holt, R-Denison, said the Cicero Institute helped draft the bill. [Iowa Public Radio, March 6, 2025].

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https://linkprotect.cudasvc.com/url?a=https%3a%2f%2fwww.huduser.gov%2fportal%2fpublications%2fExploring_Homelessness-Among-People.html&c=E.1.pqcnprLOVLN-oakgpWdMih6BiicpS-MIMe1VX4gjch1LaelpnboUDGGtwv8JaRobsplrwzArSFVYElla7KH1FtpOh1k75oHh3uk4psnB9iZFHKUJzMgo21F&typo=1

3. Cicero's assignment of blame for homelessness. "Due to the failed policies of Housing First, North Carolina's homeless numbers are

increasing rapidly, and those who need services most are facing an artificial scarcity of resources.”³

- With no proof-of-concept or apparent awareness of North Carolina’s diminishing supply of affordable housing and subsequent increases in first-time homelessness, Lonsdale blames Housing First. This federally funded, best practice prioritizes housing for those without it and offers behavioral and mental health services to stabilize residents--and with impressively low returns to homelessness. Housing with services ends homelessness. First established by the George W. Bush Administration, it has enjoyed bipartisan support subsequently, offering fiscal conservatives data demonstrating how it saves money in the long run while actually reducing homelessness. In fact, the Veterans Administration offered its own nationally based proof-of-concept for this best practice. Since 2010, Veteran homelessness has been reduced by more than 52%.⁴
- In fact, Housing First’s success in North Carolina is well documented in every county (graphic attached). Cicero offers no comparable data to prove its carceral approach works. However, now that Texas is four years out from the passage and implementation of the first Cicero bill in 2021, we can assess the outcomes for banning camping statewide, requiring communities to enforce it under threat of lawsuit, and authorizing sanctioned encampments. From 2021 to 2025, Texans experiencing homelessness increased from 49,000 to 57,000--more than a

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<https://ciceroinstitute.org/research/homelessness-in-north-carolina-a-rapidly-developing-crisis/> ⁴ <https://news.va.gov/136198/va-houses-nearly-48000-homeless-veterans/>

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quarter of whom were unsheltered.⁵ Not only do homeless encampment bans not *solve the problem* they add costs and

obstacles to people who can't find housing. Housing – not jail or confinement – is the most efficient, most humane solution.

Who could benefit financially from arresting North Carolinians without shelter?

While Cicero claims to be a “think tank,” its policies promote industries that profit from criminalizing poverty.⁶ These bills could lead to the financial enrichment of privatized jails and prisons while worsening conditions for North Carolinians without housing – potentially all on the backs of North Carolina taxpayers.

Private Prison and Detention Facility Investors

- Cicero-backed policies increase arrests and institutionalization for those who cannot afford sustainable housing, which means more bodies in jails, detention centers, and forced mental health facilities. Electronic incarceration is another part of the carceral system that uses digital technology to monitor, track, and constrain an individual's movements outside of the brick-and mortar facilities along with automated probation check-in centers or kiosks.
- States that adopt Cicero's laws find they are funneling more public money into incarceration, benefiting private contractors running these facilities and technologies.

⁵ <https://www.thn.org/thdsn/data/>

⁶ Amid record homelessness, a Texas think tank tries to upend how states tackle it [NPR All Things Considered, May 20, 2024, [policies align with industries that profit from criminalizing poverty](#)]

- At the House State and Local Government Committee, the Cicero lobbyist stated that the NC bill doesn't directly criminalize individuals

experiencing homelessness.

- But what has happened since last year when Florida passed the Cicero template language most similar to the one in North Carolina? It, too, didn't directly criminalize homelessness but penalizes communities that don't remove encampments within 5 days of notice. It sets up the possibility of legalized – or state-sanctioned encampments – as the Cicero lobbyist referred to it in the NC House Judiciary 2 Committee. Since passage in Florida, dozens of cities and counties have passed new anti camping laws, many pointing to how House Bill 1365 forced them to do so.
 - *City commissioners said they had no desire to criminalize homelessness but voted 6-0 in favor of the ordinance—noting that cities have no choice in the matter because of the state law.*⁷
 - *Thursday night, the council held a second reading of the proposed ordinances and discussed possible changes, before ultimately deciding the ordinances should be in line with what the state is requiring in the new law that went into effect this month. HB 1365 prohibits local governments from allowing people to regularly sleep or camp on public property.*⁸
- The Cicero lobbyist and the bill sponsor claimed this will be enforced humanely—a similar promise made by lawmakers in

⁷ <https://www.mainstreetdailynews.com/govt-politics/gainesville-ban-camping-sleeping-homeless> ⁸ <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/local/pensacola/2024/10/14/pensacola-homeless-camping-ban-advance-as-hb-1365-approaches/75625639007/>

Kentucky, where a pregnant woman without housing and in active labor was cited while in the process of giving birth.⁹

Who *doesn't* benefit from arresting North Carolinians without shelter?

- North Carolina's Cicero template bill language provides no fiscal support from the State, so the costs for its implementation will fall to already cash-strapped counties and municipalities. **Wisconsin's** Department of Administration--with a similar bill to the one in NC--conservatively estimated the annual price tag imposed on local governments there would be \$19.6 million.¹⁰
- Local government budgets may require increases in property taxes to be able to finance the additional officers needed to enforce camping bans and to house individuals cited for not having a place to live.
- Legal counsel for local governments across the state are reviewing their legal liability if this legislation is adopted and enforced by the State. Just a month after the **Florida** law went into effect, the first lawsuit was filed--resulting in a hasty sweep of an encampment without a plan for where people would go.¹¹
- The Drug-Free Safe Zone bill--would punish homeless service providers, requiring them to monitor others' private property of which they have no right to enter, monitor, or control.

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<https://www.lpm.org/news/2024-12-19/pregnant-kentucky-woman-cited-for-street-camping-while-in-labor>¹⁰ https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2023/related/fe/ab689/ab689_doa.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.wlrn.org/law-justice/2025-02-03/marathon-homeless-camp-lawsuit>

have no way of knowing are occurring.

- Encampment raids can make it considerably more difficult for case workers to stabilize individuals with sustained behavioral and mental health treatment—if not disrupt their progress altogether.
- Since the majority of these individuals are served by Medicaid, this would increase the state's financial burden as individuals are de-stabilized and moved from system to system.

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Senator Sires, Republican/Iowa, in response to that state's Cicero bill:

The more I look through it and the more things are in here, it's amazing to me. I am just surprised. I'm shocked - \$800 fines for people who really don't have any money or are down on their luck. We've got to think of something else. . . because this is not fair to people. I know that sounds crazy coming from a conservative Republican, but I do support my food pantry in my own hometown . . . That's all I can say. I won't be signing onto this either.