



West Warwick Town Council  
1170 Main Street  
West Warwick, RI 02893

August 6, 2018

Dear Members of the West Warwick Town Council:

We are writing to express our concern about the proposed resolution before the Council tomorrow that would authorize the display of signs at locations where panhandling occurs, encouraging passersby not to give money or other items to individuals who are panhandling. Placing such signs would do nothing to address the reasons why individuals panhandle or improve public or motorist safety, and will cost the taxpayers money that could better be spent toward real solutions.

Visible poverty – and panhandling, as a manifestation – is an end result of our failed social safety net. People panhandle because they are excluded from the formal economy, or because their wages or benefits income is insufficient to meet their basic needs. For many individuals, this leads to homelessness or housing insecurity because rents are unaffordable and waiting lists for subsidized housing are very long and there are multiple barriers to acceptance. Mental health and substance use treatment is also hard to access. While it is certainly true that there are organizations that work with people experiencing poverty, homelessness, and behavioral health challenges – including some of the groups signing this letter – we also know first-hand that there are simply not enough of these resources to go around. Additionally, the ways in which services are offered are sometimes not a good fit for what individuals need. In all of these cases, the generosity of neighbors and strangers is a much-needed bridge until that person can access more sustainable means of support.

The Resolution states, “The Town Council has received complaints and concerns by the citizens of the Town that such solicitation causes a feeling of insecurity and concern.” We would invite both the members of the Town Council and the concerned citizens to join Help the Homeless, the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project, the House of Hope CDC, or any other organization serving homeless individuals to get to know this community. It is our experience that knowing people who panhandle as individuals relieves one’s feelings of insecurity. The feeling of concern is justified: we should be concerned that we do not have sufficient social will to provide a dignified quality of life for our most vulnerable residents.

The Resolution continues, “The Town Council has determined that the location of Panhandlers on the highways and streets of the Town have an adverse effect on the traffic flow and the safety of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.” We would respectfully ask the Town Council to clarify the data used to make this assessment. When Cranston’s City Council considered its anti-panhandling ordinance – which is currently stayed pending the outcome of the ACLU’s lawsuit against it – the Council cited traffic safety data that, when further studied, did not provide a single example of a traffic accident being caused by someone panhandling.

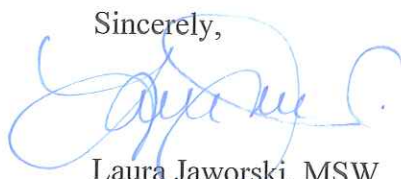
*“Helping Our Homeless”*

In addition, by advertising that panhandling rather than poverty is the problem, these signs can, however unintentionally, only encourage harassment of panhandlers and any individuals still willing to donate to them at those locations. In short, poverty, not panhandling, is the problem that needs to be addressed.

We acknowledge and appreciate the fact that the Council is eschewing more heavy-handed and unconstitutional approaches, like Cranston's attempt to ban panhandling. But rather than spending money on signs that will neither help individuals who panhandle resolve the issues that underlie their need to do so nor improve public safety, we would urge the Council to instead direct that money either toward the local charitable organization(s) that would have been suggested to motorists, or to otherwise further the development of affordable housing and outreach programs that will contribute to long-term solutions. While we welcome the Town's efforts to educate residents about what organizations to help the poor exist in their community, encouraging individuals not to give charitably as they see fit is both cruel and ineffective.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further. Please feel free to reply to Laura Jaworski, Executive Director of House of Hope CDC at (401) 463-3324 x236 or [laura@thehouseofhopecdc.org](mailto:laura@thehouseofhopecdc.org) who will apprise the other signatories of any responses.

Sincerely,



Laura Jaworski, MSW  
Executive Director

ACLU of Rhode Island  
Help the Homeless  
RI Homeless Advocacy Project