

2026 PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

Stop the criminalization of homelessness and focus on real solutions instead

In 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court made a ruling that allows cities to punish people experiencing homelessness even when there is no shelter available to them. Now cities in Washington are increasingly passing and enforcing laws that fine, arrest, and punish people simply for trying to survive outdoors, even while failing to provide accessible shelter options. Lawmakers should protect people experiencing homelessness by stopping this kind of criminalization and passing House Bill 2489. Under HB 2489, local governments will be required to focus on real solutions to homelessness, instead of punishing and harming people.

Fining, arresting, and incarcerating people who can't afford a home does not solve homelessness. It is also expensive and detracts from real solutions. Instead, local governments – with state support – should expand access to shelter, services including mental health and substance use treatment, and affordable housing, while also adopting policies that help people stay in their homes. These are real solutions that protect everyone in our community.

Local enforcement actions have led to the loss of medication, identification cards, medical records, family photos, sleeping bags, bedding, and other vital personal property individuals need to survive. These losses make it harder for people to access health care, employment, benefits, and housing, prolonging homelessness rather than ending it.

Key points:

- Homelessness is increasing, not because of a lack of enforcement, but because housing is unaffordable.
- Criminalization policies increase costs for police, courts, and jails while making it harder for people to secure housing and services.
- HB 2489 helps ensure local responses to homelessness align with proven strategies instead of relying on punishment that causes harm without results.

Protecting people experiencing homelessness is a key policy element in our "Roadmap to Housing Justice" – a comprehensive strategy to end the housing and homelessness crisis in Washington. Learn more at wliha.org/roadmap