



Public Testimony
House Judiciary Committee
House Bill 5210, House Bill 5258 (Oppose)
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Submitted by The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty

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The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty is a coalition of diverse religious communities and advocacy partners throughout the state who have come together to fight poverty. We are submitting written testimony today to express our opposition to House Bill 5210 and House Bill 5258, proposals that would criminalize panhandling.

We are concerned that criminalizing panhandling will, in fact, exacerbate existing cycles of poverty. Very often individuals who are panhandling on the street are facing extremely serious economic struggles, and often in quite desperate circumstances. People who panhandle may not have any other means of obtaining the money they need for food, bus fare or other necessities. If a person is panhandling out of desperation and poverty, and then arrested, he or she would face both a misdemeanor criminal charge and a fine of \$100-\$500, under House Bill 5258. Needless to say, many people who are experiencing financial hardship to the degree that they have been driven to panhandling are unlikely to be able to produce \$100-\$500. Further, the piling up of criminal charges (even at a misdemeanor level) risks shackling people with a permanent criminal record, creating yet another roadblock for people who are already struggling. With a criminal record on file, an individual becomes only *less* likely to be able to obtain a job or secure an apartment in the future. We are concerned that this then creates a “vicious cycle,” entrenching people still more firmly in a permanent state of poverty. We are called to help lift each other up *out* of poverty, providing pathways to financial stability; this bill risks creating the opposite result.

Additionally, there is an important question at stake about the free expression of religious values raised in House Bill 5210. We believe that every person should have the right to give charitably to poor individuals asking for money, if he or she feels called to do so by his or her faith and values. Choosing whether, when and how to give to those who are asking for money is a vexing religious question, with ethical and spiritual implications. Individual giving is very important to many

faith leaders. Just last week, for example, Pope Francis gave a public statement in support of universal giving to individuals seeking assistance. He said during an interview that “‘There are many excuses’ to justify why one doesn’t lend a hand when asked by a person begging on the street...But giving something to someone in need ‘is always right,’ and it should be done with respect and compassion...”¹ Pope Francis is not alone in this position. Many people believe that it is a religious requirement for Jewish people on Purim to give directly to at least two people living in poverty. Maimonides, a key thinker whose work remains foundational for many contemporary Jewish communities, said that, “Anyone who puts out his hand to take should be given money...One who brings joy to the hearts of these disadvantaged individuals resembles God.”² This is not the only way to approach charity, of course. Other religious leaders and people of faith choose a different approach, targeting money to organizations, instead of individuals, believing that this is a better path. Still other faithful individuals do both, giving to individuals *and* organizations. Some people of faith do neither, based on either their beliefs or their circumstances. There is significant variation within every religious tradition, and the choice is a deeply personal one. We are not prescribing one right path for everyone. However, given the religious importance of giving, shared by many Rhode Islanders across many faiths, we believe that it is inappropriate for the state of Rhode Island to impose restrictions on such charitable giving. We oppose criminalizing well-intentioned acts of generosity via legislation that is directed at either the giver (House Bill 5210) or the receiver (House Bill 5258) of such charity.

Finally, we are supportive of the rights of community groups to communicate with the broader public. Members of labor unions, public service organizations such as fire fighters, and many others often solicit funds for charitable purposes or pass out information useful to the public. These bills could undermine their efforts. These issues have been fully highlighted by members of those groups so we do not need to express those concerns in detail, here, but we acknowledge the importance of those issues, as well, and urge the General Assembly to take these many concerns to heart.

¹ Glatz, Carol. “Don’t worry how it’s spent, always give homeless a handout, pope says.” Catholic News Service, February 28, 2017. Available online at <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/dont-worry-how-its-spent-always-give-homeless-a-handout-pope-says.cfm>

² Huppin, Beth. “On Purim, are Jews obligated to give money to panhandlers? (COMMENTARY)” Washington Post, March 3, 2015. Available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/on-purim-are-jews-obligated-to-give-money-to-panhandlers-commentary/2015/03/03/5940edda-c1eb-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d_story.html?utm_term=.b9ee7a12dfcb