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TO: Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing, Rural Issues & Forestry
FROM: Kacy Kostiuk, Director, Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
DATE: February 4, 2026
RE: Comments Opposing Senate Bill 621

Dear Chair Quinn and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Kacy Kostiuk. I serve as Director of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, which is a ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We bring Lutheran voices to statewide legislative issues through advocacy for policies that promote peace, justice, and care for creation.

On behalf of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, I am here to testify in **opposition to Senate Bill 621**. This bill seeks to respond to a deep and shared concern: support for community members who are experiencing homelessness. We appreciate the seriousness of this issue and the desire to find solutions. Unfortunately, SB-621 would not solve the underlying problems and could instead create additional and lasting harm for people who are already living in extremely vulnerable circumstances.

Criminalizing Temporary Residence on Public Property

SB-621 would prohibit establishing a temporary residence on public property that is not designated for camping and would impose a Class C misdemeanor penalty for second and subsequent violations. This raises serious concerns for us, both as people of faith and as advocates for effective, compassionate public policy.

As the ELCA's social message on homelessness reminds us: "Homelessness concerns people, human beings created in God's image for a life of dignity in justice. The story of each homeless person is unique. The name, the circumstances, the decisions, the faith, the joys, and sorrows of each belong to precious individuals" ([Message on Homelessness: A Renewal of Commitment](#), p. 1).

Becoming homeless is often triggered by crisis – a job loss, lack of affordable housing, health challenges, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence, or other destabilizing events. Once a person loses stable housing, they often enter a downward spiral that is extremely difficult to escape. This bill risks deepening that spiral by limiting where people can sleep and criminalizing actions taken for basic survival.

Criminalization of Survival Actions

A Class C misdemeanor offense carries maximum penalties of up to 30 days in jail, a fine of up to \$500, or both. It also creates a reinforcing cycle where survival behavior is criminalized, but that criminalization makes survival even more difficult. Even if jail time is avoided, a conviction of a Class C misdemeanor creates a permanent criminal record, which can have devastating long-term consequences, appearing on background checks and affecting access to employment, occupational licenses, housing, and even shelter eligibility. For individuals already struggling to regain stability, this can close doors precisely when we should be opening them.

Conditions for Camping in Structured Facilities

The bill also conditions temporary residence at a structured camping facility on completion of mental health or substance use evaluations. While this provision may be intended to connect people with services, applying it universally raises more questions than it potentially resolves. There is a significant shortage of mental health and substance use providers in Wisconsin, and accessing evaluations and referrals for treatment can prove incredibly difficult. Who would do the assessments? How would the unhoused access them? Referrals for treatment can require a wait of several weeks to months. Where would individuals go while they await a treatment opening?

The location of structured camping facilities also raises concerns. If people are moved away from locations with access to treatment, transportation, employment, schools, or other support networks, this could deepen their isolation and instability.

Opposition to SB-621

Many ELCA congregations across Wisconsin accompany people who are experiencing poverty or homelessness – by providing meals, supportive services, and safe spaces of welcome. These ministries are not abstract to us. People who have experienced homelessness, are currently at risk, and are still unhoused are members of our congregations and our communities.

One example is Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison. Its homeless support ministry grew out of tragedy. In the winter of 2009, a man named Eric Manley, who was unhoused, died after lying down on the church steps. That loss compelled the congregation to deepen its commitment to presence, relationship, and support. Although Bethel does not directly provide housing, its support ministry demonstrates how dignity, relationship, and access to services are essential.

We share this story to underscore what best prevents tragedy: access to housing, supportive services, and a caring community. Policies that isolate and criminalize survival behaviors do not save lives; they make stability harder to reach. For these reasons, we respectfully urge you to oppose Senate Bill 621. Thank you for your service and your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Kacy Kostiuk