



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Representative Robert Brooks, Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Housing and Real Estate

FROM: Tia Izzia, Associate Director for Human Life & Social Concerns

DATE: January 21, 2026

RE: Opposition to Assembly Bill 631 Structured Camping Facilities for Homeless Individuals

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), the public policy voice of the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin, respectfully urges opposition to Assembly Bill 631, which classifies setting up a temporary residence on public property statewide as a Class C misdemeanor and authorizes the Department of Administration (DOA) and other political subdivisions to set up structured camping facilities for the homeless on public property.

An individual who violates the prohibition by setting up a temporary residence on public property is subject to a warning notice for a first violation and then is guilty of a Class C misdemeanor for a second or subsequent violation. The penalty does not apply if the individual has been placed on a waiting list for a structured camping facility, which may or may not exist in their community. The bill goes further than last session's bill (2023 AB 689) in criminalizing conduct because it omits the exemption of not having other reasonable options for obtaining shelter or beds available at shelters.

Those facing homelessness should not be punished merely because they lack shelter. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in 2024, "The Catholic Church, consistent with western tradition, has long taught that the homeless are to be helped, not punished. It also has long taught that punishments must be proportional to the crimes for which they are imposed. Underlying both teachings is a simple principle: respect for human dignity."¹ This bill, while offering a warning for a first offense, provides that a violation leads to a fine not to exceed \$500 or imprisonment not to exceed 30 days, or both. This is not proportional to the offense of sleeping on public property.

Instead of lifting individuals out of homelessness, the bill's methods may compound problems for them. The imposition of fines, jail time, and a criminal record only make it harder for individuals to dig themselves out of homelessness and poverty and achieve gainful employment. We also know that housing programs and landlords may be reluctant to accept individuals with a criminal record. And our jails and prisons are already over capacity.

¹ Brief of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as *Amicus Curiae* in Support of Respondents, *City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson* (2024), <https://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/amicus-briefs/upload/Grants%20Pass%20-USCCB%20Amicus%20Brief%20-%202023%20April%202024.pdf>.

Though the intent to provide shelter is undoubtedly good, the structured camping facilities contemplated by the bill may not be the best vehicle to do so. Those who work with the homeless can attest to the fact that homeless individuals and families often fear being around other homeless individuals, for a variety of legitimate reasons. Individuals and families should not be compelled to go to one of these facilities or risk criminalization. Further, though the bill requires DOA to provide for public safety and ensure potable water and adequate sanitary facilities are available, it provides no funding mechanism to do so. The bill also fails to provide for the various social services which are needed for the homeless, especially in a congregate facility.

Under the bill, DOA must condition a homeless individual's or family's temporary residence at a structured camping facility on the completion of mental health or substance use evaluations, and DOA may expel individuals who fail to comply with DOA instructions. Though the bill does not explicitly state that individuals must leave the structured camping facility if they fail a drug test or have a mental health condition, it similarly does not provide for proper services to be provided to those individuals. If the only option is non-admittance or removal from the facility and therefore sleeping on the streets, individuals will face criminal consequences.

In 2020, the Cicero Institute shared the following about structured camping facilities:

The main complaints of the homeless about these camps are usually their distance from services, food, and public transportation. There are ways to ensure these amenities in the camps at minimal expense. For instance, the government may open "day resource centers" where the homeless can stay during the daytime and be provided with basic social services that are more often located downtown, often in the midst of busy commercial districts.²

However, there is no provision for these resource centers or requirement that the camping facilities are feasible for individuals to reach by public transportation.

We recognize that, just as the causes of homelessness are many, so too the views on appropriate policy responses to homelessness may vary. But imposing statewide criminal penalties for being homeless without access to shelter is not the way. Instead, we should return to implementing the recommendations of the Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness.³

We urge a compassionate, comprehensive approach to addressing homelessness across our state, respecting the dignity of every person while working toward responsible and supportive solutions to assist the most vulnerable. We respectfully ask you to oppose AB 631.

² Judge Glock, Cicero Institute, *Solving Texas's Street Homelessness Problem* (December 21, 2020), <https://ciceroinstitute.org/research/solving-texas-street-homelessness-problem/>.

³ State of Wisconsin Department of Administration, Interagency Council on Homelessness (February 28, 2022), <https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/AboutDOA/ICH.aspx>.