

August 24, 2017

Burlington City Council  
City Hall  
149 Church Street  
Burlington, Vermont 05401

Re: Response to challenging behaviors of vulnerable citizens

Greetings,

Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform opposes any new city ordinance that permits the imposition of criminal penalties for civil offenses.

As Vermonters, we are already burdened by the fiscal and human costs of unnecessary incarceration. Our prisons are already full of poor, addicted and mentally ill people who could not get the treatment and support they needed in the community, and do not get it when they are in prison.

While the concerns of business owners and community residents are important and valid, the criminal code is the wrong tool to address these concerns. The antecedents to problem behaviors and the risk of violence in our community does not relate to minor civil infractions, or the non-payment of civil fines. The antecedents relate to the fact that people who are homeless, mentally ill and addicted to alcohol are not getting the help they need. The systems we rely on to address these issues are not adequately addressing the needs of this small group of severely compromised people. This is our failure not their failure.

As Chief Brandon del Pozo said, "Reducing crime and disorder without increasing arrests and tickets or infringing on liberties is the cornerstone goal of democratic policing." Those words argue against the creation of a new criminal offense, and in favor of a community-based public health response to the challenging, non-criminal behaviors exhibited by those who need our help the most.

We urge the City of Burlington to reject any effort to unnecessarily criminalize poor people, homeless people, mentally ill people, and addicted people. Instead, we ask that the City of Burlington move forward with an effort to bring community mental health, alcohol and drug treatment, shelter and housing providers together with police and other stakeholders to address the unmet needs of this small group of homeless people who are so visibly struggling.

For these reasons, we urge you to oppose Councilor Wright's resolution and support Councilor Roof's resolution relating to this issue.

Respectfully,



Tom Dalton, Executive Director