



Legislative Testimony

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Written Testimony Opposing House Bill 5472, An Act Concerning The Exploitation of Children in Panhandling

Representative Urban, Senator Moore, Senator Suzio, and Members of the Committee on Children. My name is David McGuire, and I am the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut. As an organization committed to defending civil liberties under the U.S. and Connecticut Constitutions, the ACLU-CT strongly supports measures that ensure liberty, justice, and equality and opposes those that threaten fundamental rights. As a result, I am here to urge you to oppose H.B. 5472, which would allow municipalities to prohibit children under eighteen from soliciting any alms, collection or contribution on streets, sidewalks, or in other public places.

This attempt to punish homelessness at the expense of free speech is overbroad and constitutionally impermissible. It would impede well-established rights, including the right to beg, the right to distribute information and seek donations, and the right to be free from vague laws and discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic condition.

While this bill is a well-intentioned effort to protect children, it is unnecessary. Begging, like other charitable solicitation, is protected speech under the First Amendment. Where child endangerment accompanies begging, existing Connecticut statutes are sufficient to give rise to criminal liability. Connecticut's existing laws includes protections for children's wellbeing that would preclude dangerous attempts to abuse child solicitors, such as provisions to prevent physical and sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment, physical or educational neglect, moral neglect, labor trafficking, and coercion. In addition, Connecticut's risk of injury to a minor statutes cover almost all dangers to children.

Despite the fact that the proposed bill's purpose is ostensibly to prevent child panhandling, its broad wording could also allow municipal prohibitions on children asking for contributions of any kind, in any public space. This bill could ban a Girl Scout troop from selling cookies on a sidewalk, children from soliciting donations at local parks for the Kids for Kids bread drive in Stamford, or a talented young musician from playing guitar on a street corner with a donation cup.

Instead of providing families in need with tools to avoid resorting to begging, this bill would allow cities to punish children and parents who are trying to give their families a chance at survival. Instead of providing children with food, shelter, education, or comfort, this bill would create

family instability and trauma. Sweeping poor children from the streets will not address the underlying issues that lead to begging in the first place. I urge you to oppose H.B. 5472.