

Dear Chairman Awerkamp and members of the Committee,

My name is David Hawley, and I own Papa Keno's, a casual restaurant in Downtown Lawrence. Today, I want to bring to your attention the pressing issue of homelessness in our community and work towards finding viable solutions to this crisis.

Over the years, homelessness in Douglas County, particularly in downtown Lawrence, has been on the rise. However, the problem has escalated significantly since the onset of the pandemic. As a long-time resident of Lawrence and business owner, I have witnessed firsthand the detrimental effects of this issue.

During the pandemic, I have observed a noticeable increase in the homeless population in our community. This has had a significant impact on businesses like mine. The safety and well-being of my staff and customers have been compromised, as incidents of theft, aggression, and other related issues have become more frequent. I hear from customers and my staff that downtown no longer feels safe. I have employees that have been assaulted at work and on the way to their cars after work. These incidents not only create an unsafe environment but also deter potential customers from visiting local establishments, leading to a decline in revenue.

The presence of makeshift shelters, camps, and individuals struggling with homelessness has significantly impacted the overall aesthetics of our downtown area. Parks and sidewalks, which are meant to be public spaces, have unfortunately become areas where people are living. This raises concerns about safety for both the individuals experiencing homelessness and those who use the public spaces. It is disheartening to see this situation unfold, as it creates an atmosphere of insecurity and discomfort.

As business owners, my staff and I are constantly working to maintain cleanliness on the sidewalks and around our store. We serve many families in our restaurant, and our primary concern is the potential exposure of children to needles and other drug paraphernalia. With the growing dangers of substances like fentanyl, this becomes an alarming safety issue. It not only poses a risk to public health but also has severe consequences for the well-being of our community.

Furthermore, the presence of makeshift shelters and individuals struggling with homelessness has hindered the economic growth of our city. The diminished appeal of downtown areas and the safety concerns surrounding them deter potential investors and visitors, ultimately impeding the overall development and prosperity of our community.

Two significant challenges that arise from the homeless population in our community are related to mental health and substance abuse. These issues have had a direct impact on my business and staff. On multiple occasions, we have had to deal with the presence of syringes in our bathrooms and on the sidewalks outside our restaurant. This poses a serious health and safety concern for both my staff and customers.

Furthermore, my staff has encountered individuals with mental health challenges, and without proper training on how to handle such situations, some of these encounters have escalated to the point of physical attacks on our staff members. It is distressing to see my employees put at risk while trying to communicate and assist someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis.

To address these challenges, it is imperative that we prioritize mental health support and addiction recovery services for the homeless population. Accessible and comprehensive mental health care, including counseling, therapy, and psychiatric services, should be made available to individuals struggling with mental health issues. Similarly, substance abuse treatment programs that focus on rehabilitation and support should be implemented to help those grappling with addiction.

Providing training and resources to business owners and their staff members on how to effectively and safely handle encounters with individuals experiencing mental health crises is also crucial. This can include workshops, seminars, and partnerships with mental health professionals who can provide guidance on de-escalation techniques and appropriate responses in such situations.

By addressing the underlying mental health and addiction issues faced by the homeless population, we can not only improve the well-being of these individuals but also enhance the safety and security of our businesses and community as a whole. It is essential that we allocate resources and collaborate with relevant organizations and agencies to ensure the availability of these vital support services.

Lawrence has an endless amount of compassion for those needing help, but our resources are not endless. In conversations with members of the homeless community often times they have disclosed that they have come to Lawrence from neighboring communities. If we do not identify the community that we serve and keep taking in people from neighboring areas, we will never be able to make a difference. We need to find a solution to prevent other communities from sending their homeless to Lawrence and help get them back to the communities where they can get the support they need and better serve our community. We need some kind of legislation to discourage this behavior.

Developing a by name database is another solution that would help identify the services these individuals need and track their progress. This data also helps allocate resources where they are needed most.

Another solution that I believe would greatly streamline access to services is the creation of a centralized hub where individuals experiencing homelessness can easily access all available resources. Establishing a one-stop shop facility would be instrumental in directing people to the specific services they require. This does not necessarily imply that all agencies and organizations would operate under one roof, but rather that knowledgeable staff members would be present to guide individuals and connect them with the appropriate services they need. Whether it's employment, housing, mental health support, or substance use disorder treatment facilities, this centralized hub would serve as a vital resource in coordinating and facilitating access to these essential services.

Enforcing panhandling ordinances is essential to guide the homeless population towards the agencies that can provide the necessary help and support. While compassion compels us to assist these individuals, it is crucial to acknowledge that enabling can inadvertently perpetuate the cycle of homelessness. Rather than simply providing handouts, we should focus on empowering them by connecting them with professional resources and services that can make a lasting impact on their lives. By directing them towards these resources, we can ensure that the most effective assistance is provided and increase the chances of their successful reintegration into society.

Additionally, we must invest in comprehensive outreach programs that aim to connect individuals experiencing homelessness with available resources and support networks. By providing case

management, counseling, and employment assistance, we can empower these individuals to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.

Lastly, public education and awareness campaigns are vital to combatting the stigma associated with homelessness. By fostering empathy and understanding within our community, we can encourage greater support for initiatives that address the root causes of homelessness and promote sustainable solutions.

In conclusion, the issue of homelessness in our community demands immediate attention and concerted efforts from all stakeholders. By implementing a comprehensive strategy that focuses on housing, outreach, and public education, we can work towards mitigating the challenges faced by our community and creating a more inclusive and prosperous future for all. Thank you for your time and for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,
David Hawley