

February 16, 2021

Madame Chair and the Representatives who sit on the Preventing Homelessness Division:

My name is Melissa Pohlman and I am writing to support HF 900. I am one of the pastors at Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis. Central Lutheran is a part of Align Minneapolis which is a coalition of 17 Minneapolis congregations that represent thousands of congregants across the Twin Cities. At Central we have fifty years of working with people who experience homelessness and poverty in Minneapolis in order to provide for folk's basic needs. In my seven years of ministry in this place I have heard innumerable stories from people who were staying at shelters and people who were sleeping outside about the conditions they experienced in shelters. These stories range from physical and sexual assault to not being able to eat because of deeply held faith convictions to waking up in the middle of the night while someone was stealing their earrings out of their earlobes. Several years ago we became the place where people with these stories began to work together to address the issues they experienced in shelters. Street Voices of Change was created to change the conditions of being homeless in Minneapolis.

For months members of Street Voices of Change crafted the Shelter Residents Bill of Rights to address the most common problems in single adult shelters in Minneapolis. Once completed we worked through the Office to End Homelessness in Hennepin County to encourage this document to be instrumental in awarding funds from Hennepin County to shelter providers. Up to this point the contracts between the county and the providers were vague. We found allies in Commissioners Fernando, Greene, Conley and Goettel. In December of 2019 the Shelter Residents Bill of Rights was adopted by the Hennepin County Board and is now a part of all single adult shelter contracts in the county.

Street Voices of Change members were horrified to learn that there are no protections for people experiencing homelessness statewide. As we looked to bring this bill of rights to protect more folks, we discovered the vast diversity in people's experiences of homelessness across the state. We know that emergency shelter is an important safety net and a step in getting people back in their own homes. I ask you to support bill HF 900 as a first step in giving the people who are the experts on shelter a place to dialogue and come up with solutions in an equitable way. People who use shelters and people who sleep outside are the people who know what they need and how to create standards that care for all Minnesotans. This bill will for the first time on a state level bring together providers of shelter and shelter residents and those who have opted out of shelter due to the conditions in order to create solutions. Thank you for your time, and your good work.

Pastor Melissa Pohlman