

**Bill would give those living in cars right to last few possessions**

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March 12, 2008 — 11:15pm

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They let Tony Ruston take a shoe. One shoe.

Ruston, 47, is homeless. Everything he owned was in a 1977 pickup with a camper on top, which is where he began living in 2006 after he lost his job as a truck driver.

He wasn't alone in his choice of four-wheeled domiciles.

A growing number of people live in cars these days, forced out of their homes by foreclosures, too poor to find a place to sleep other than their back seat. But when you live on the street, or park your life on one, you can lose everything to a tow truck.

That's why advocates for the homeless are hoping to win passage of a law in the Legislature that would let the homeless retrieve their belongings from vehicles in impound lots, even if they can't pay to get the car back. The House author, Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, calls it, "The Let-people-get-their-stuff Bill."

Hornstein says it is a matter of "simple human dignity" and says the current law, which allows impound lots to auction vehicles with all their contents, does not take into account the fact that people living in their cars can suddenly find themselves deprived of their records, their medications, their keepsakes and sometimes even their children's homework.

It's a throwback to feudal times when the king could take your cow, burn down your hut and throw you into the ditch.

That's pretty much how Ruston felt in December.

His truck held his tools, his clothes, his papers, his mother's funeral program -- the only photo he had of his late mom, Lois, and a souvenir bell she had kept since she was 13.

It's all gone now, except for one shoe that workers at the impound lot let Ruston take before his truck was auctioned off. The truck, which was licensed and insured, was worth about $2,500, Ruston says. But when it was towed from a St. Paul street (Ruston admits he had accumulated a number of unpaid parking tickets), the charge to get it released started at more than $200, and grew by $30 a day.

"Even if it was only fifty bucks, I can't get that kind of money," Ruston says glumly.

At the time, Ruston had a cast on his right foot, which was broken. He limped through the city impound lot, found his truck and asked to get his belongings. Lot employees let him take a right shoe from the truck -- the one matching the one he was wearing on his good foot. But nothing else.

The truck was auctioned later, its contents vanished. Most likely, they were trashed by the new owner of the pickup.

It happens all the time.

"Most of these things are valuable to nobody but their owners, but they are all just destroyed," says Ron Elwood, a legal aid lawyer who is one of the advocates arguing for a law change. "It's idiotic: Pictures of grandparents, keepsakes, Christmas presents. We even heard of a case where they wouldn't give a wheelchair back. We want the law changed so that if you're poor, or you're homeless -- and you can prove it -- you can get your stuff."

The change in the law has been discussed for several years without getting anywhere because some towing companies fear they would lose "leverage" over owners of impounded cars if they can reclaim their belongings. But the opposition has faded as awareness has grown of the problem, and the bill was approved Wednesday by a House subcommittee and will be considered today by the full House Transportation Finance Committee. On Friday, it will get a hearing before a Senate committee, and passage is expected.

Poverty surging

The timing, unfortunately, is good: Homelessness is rising as foreclosures continue and a recession arrives. Every night, 1,000 people -- one out of eight homeless persons -- are unable to find shelter. Others are sleeping in cars.

"This is a common problem," says Michael Dahl, executive director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, who testified in support of the bill yesterday. "It may seem like small potatoes, when you are talking about ending homelessness. But when people lose everything they have -- wallets, IDs, even credit cards -- it makes a bad situation worse.

"It makes it harder for them to get out of it."

"Many people are a paycheck away from a bad situation," says Elwood. "We have a perfect storm to increase the number of homeless."

Ruston, who has lived in a shelter since losing his pickup, sees it all from the perspective of a person who has almost nothing left to him.

"They didn't give me nothing except my shoe," he says. "I was angry. That truck was my only connection to any kind of independence. They took it away from me. They even took my mother's picture."

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