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Grannemann: Housing-first approach can help end homelessness

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Monday, the Supreme Court began to weigh in on *Grants Pass v. Johnson*, a case that revolves around the legality of a city issuing fines or arresting individuals for sleeping in public when they have no adequate access to shelter. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that this kind of criminal punishment for people is unconstitutional.

Gloria Johnson, the defendant in this case, has a familiar story. A 68-year-old retired nurse, Johnson had no other option but to sleep in her car due to a lack of affordable housing or adequate shelter space. In response, the city of Grants Pass, Oregon, issued Johnson tickets. Unsurprisingly, this did not help her move any closer to stable housing. In fact, with criminal charges hanging over their heads, people like Johnson are less likely to overcome the burden of homelessness.

Punitive measures like these are a symptom of a broken system that is often perpetuated by local and state governments nationwide. Instead of focusing on the root causes of homelessness, which are systemic challenges that require a collective and integrated approach, they become overly reliant on enforcement measures.

By penalizing individuals who are already marginalized we further entrench them in a cycle of hopelessness. There is a better way.

Investing in proactive support rather than reactive punishment is both the compassionate choice and the economically prudent one.

While homelessness is often correlated with mental health and substance abuse challenges, studies have consistently shown that the cost of providing housing with support services is far

lower than the expenses incurred through emergency services like hospitalizations, incarcerations and shelters.

In cities across the country, embracing housing-first approaches has yielded substantial cost savings while improving outcomes for people and communities alike.

As the Supreme Court deliberates on Gloria Johnson's case, we should put ourselves in the shoes of those currently experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. Imagine that you or someone you love has nowhere else to go but a car or park bench. Ask yourself, under these circumstances, would a fine help you find a better solution? Instead of further failing our most vulnerable citizens, let's embrace solutions that are both humane and effective and choose empathy over indifference. The positive impact of stable housing is undeniable, contributing to stronger outcomes in education, employment, health and wealth on every level, while also stabilizing neighborhoods.

At Rocket Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of Rocket Companies, we are also committed to ending homelessness as a lead partner for Built for Zero, a national movement of more than 100 communities working to prove that homelessness is solvable.

Since 2018, we've invested more than \$50 million in Detroit, and in communities across the country, to prevent displacement from tax foreclosure, increase homeownership opportunities and protect renters from the threat of eviction.

The backbone of the Built for Zero methodology is that communities capture real-time, by-name data on each person and their needs, instead of working off of an outdated, once-a-year count. Using this methodology, 14 communities across the country have achieved "functional zero" for at least one population — such as veterans or those who are chronically homeless — making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

In Detroit, the Built for Zero approach has led to a reduction in veteran homelessness of nearly 50% since 2018.

Put simply, we invest in Built for Zero because it works. We also know what doesn't work: criminalizing homelessness.

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