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Press Release: Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center Files Amicus Brief in Support of the Rights of the Homeless in Landmark Supreme Court Case

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Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center Joins Faith-Based Organizations, Medical Professionals, Legal Experts, Academic Leaders, Advocates, and Members of Congress to Urge an End to the Criminalization of Homelessness

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, April 4, 2024 — Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center (**SNP**) announced that it submitted an amicus brief on April 3 in support of the Plaintiffs, Gloria Johnson, John Logan and the class of homeless people that they represent, in the upcoming landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. Grants Pass*.

Johnson v. Grants Pass is the most important case regarding homelessness in the past 40 years to be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court will consider whether local laws punishing the homeless for sleeping outdoors with basic protections like a pillow or blanket violate the Constitution's Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

SNP joins hundreds of organizations and public leaders who have submitted amicus briefs in solidarity with the rights of homeless individuals.

Currently, more than 600,000 people in America experience homelessness on any given night, with nearly half—250,000—sleeping outside. Data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shows a rise in homelessness for both sheltered and unsheltered individuals in nearly every state. The primary cause of the record levels of homelessness we see today is the unaffordable housing market, according to the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies.

New York City has one of the largest homeless populations in the United States, at well over 100,000 people at the city's last estimate. Despite New York's constitutional right to shelter, distinct groups of homeless people do not have guaranteed access to shelter and have no choice but to sleep outside. SNP's amicus brief argues that it is cruel and unusual punishment to penalize homeless people for sleeping in public space with the rudimentary protections they need to survive the weather. In the brief, homeless New Yorkers speak about how policing, fines, and jail time impact them, making chronic homelessness harder to escape, increasing violent and discriminatory interactions between homeless people and law enforcement, and constantly pushing homeless individuals from one place to the next.

"SNP works with street homeless New Yorkers every day," stated **Natalie Druce, staff attorney at SNP**. "Ticketing and arresting homeless people for sleeping outside – when sleep is a human need – is cruel and counterproductive. We know that fines and jail time don't help people get access to permanent housing, which is the only true solution to homelessness. In fact, they only cause the gap between street homelessness and housing to widen. We submitted this amicus brief, which incorporates the voices of homeless New Yorkers, to make sure the Court understands the devastating, nationwide consequences these laws would have."

Talking about the importance of contributing to the amicus brief, SNP client, **Eduardo Ventura**, who has been homeless for most of his life, stated, "it's already punishment enough just being homeless... you already have to worry about so much - about where you're going to sleep, what to eat, your health, everything. On top of that, now we might have to worry about whether they're going to arrest us and put us in jail. It's too much... [these laws will] throw us from one place to another, they're not fixing homelessness - they're just sending it to become someone else's problem."

"It's hard enough dealing with everyday life on the street... to be persecuted for it as well is really psychologically damaging," **James Doukas**, who has been homeless for over two years in NYC, stated in SNP's amicus brief.

In the brief, discussing the impacts that issuing fines to homeless people for sleeping outside would have on the homeless population, **Stevie**, another homeless New Yorker, stated that it would be "financially devastating. Money that you don't have would be taken from you and you going to court for not having a place [to live] is another form of inhumane treatment... It's not going to benefit nobody. You're taking food out of their mouths. It's endless the amount of damage it could cause. I think that's the idea of it. A form of punishment for the situation. Some people believe you have to motivate people to get out of this situation, to motivate people out of the situation by being arrested."



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“This case challenges us to face the reality that using things like jails and fines do nothing to solve homelessness and actually make homelessness worse” said **Jesse Rabinowitz, campaign and communications director for the National Homelessness Law Center**, which coordinated groups nationwide to submit amicus briefs in this case. “Punishing our neighbors who have no choice but to sleep outside pushes them further into poverty and makes it harder to secure work and housing. The overwhelming support from a diverse array of organizations that we see in these amicus briefs underscores the need for our elected officials at every level of government to solve homelessness with housing and support, not make homelessness worse by using jail cells and bulldozers.”

SNP works with people experiencing poverty, evictions, and homelessness to fight for economic justice. We do this work through a combination of litigation, legal services, community organizing, policy advocacy, and news media campaigns. SNP provides free legal services to thousands of low and no-income households. The goal of this work is to minimize evictions, bolster tenants' rights, enforce the rights of homeless New Yorkers, and facilitate crucial access to public benefits. SNP's advocacy and policy work is done in coordination and partnership with the Safety Net Activists, a volunteer group of community members with lived experience of poverty, homelessness, and the public benefits system.

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