

Lawrence Mower and Aaron Leibowitz, Touting ‘law and order,’ DeSantis signs bill allowing homeless camps in South Florida, Miami Herald, March 20, 2024

Gov. Ron DeSantis on Wednesday signed into law a ban on homeless people sleeping in parks, sidewalks and other public spaces, calling it a solution to communities “plagued” with homelessness.



Miami Beach Police officers talk to a homeless person seating behind the CVS Store located at 322 Lincoln Road a couple of hours after the Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the HB 1365 bill “to keep Florida’s streets safe”, at a press conference at a restaurant in South Beach on Tuesday March 20, 2024.

During a news conference in Miami Beach, which recently started arresting homeless people who refuse to go to a shelter, DeSantis touted the legislation as furthering his “law and order” agenda.

“You should not be accosted by a homeless [person],” DeSantis said. “You should be able to walk down the street and live your life.”

The legislation, [House Bill 1365](#), forbids cities and counties, beginning Oct. 1, from allowing people to sleep or camp in public spaces.

Those communities could instead create camps — away from neighborhoods and businesses — approved by the Department of Children and Families. Most communities would have to offer security, sanitation and behavioral health services to people staying at the camps.

To force communities to remove homeless people, HB 1365 allows people, businesses and the

attorney general to sue local government starting Jan. 1, 2025.

Cities and counties would have five days to “cure the alleged violation.” If the lawsuit is successful, the city or county would have to pay attorneys’ fees and costs.

Democratic lawmakers noted that the bill was proposed despite there being no studies or data to support it. The legislation was supported by the Texas-based Cicero Institute, a think tank created by the Austin, Texas-based venture capitalist Joe Lonsdale, [who supported](#) DeSantis’ failed presidential campaign.

DeSantis said homeless people still needed to be treated, but not in a way that

would “impinge on the public’s right to have a high quality of life.”

“I think this is the absolute right balance to strike,” he said. “I don’t think there’s any other way you could approach it.”

Democratic lawmakers and activists said GOP lawmakers seemed more concerned with removing homeless people than helping them. Communities could have to choose between forcing people to go to camps or arresting them.

Lawmakers are offering \$10 million total for the state’s 67 counties to comply with the law. Instead of offering more money, the legislation exempts 29 “[fiscally constrained](#)” counties from providing the sanitation, security and services required at camps under the bill.

“You don’t really mean it that you’re trying to help homeless people, let’s be honest,” Sen.

Jason Pizzo, D-Miami, said on the Senate floor earlier this month.

FLORIDA'S HOMELESS STRATEGIES

DeSantis said that Florida was nothing like California, Seattle or New York City, which have struggled with homeless camps and thousands of homeless people.

“They let the inmates run the asylum,” DeSantis said.

In Florida last year, [the state reported](#) 30,809 people experiencing homelessness, about half of whom were sleeping in cars or abandoned buildings. That’s a 9% increase from 2019.

The national rise in homelessness is largely attributed to a lack of affordable housing, an issue that Florida lawmakers mostly ignored [until last year](#).

Communities have adopted various strategies for addressing homeless people, from blasting public [parks with annoying music](#) to [banning panhandling](#).

Miami Beach last year [allowed homeless people to be arrested](#) if they declined to go to a shelter. Miami Beach police [arrested 20 people](#) under the ordinance late last year, most of whom were sleeping on the beach, according to police reports.

“Law and order reigns supreme here,” Miami Beach Mayor Steven Meiner said Wednesday.

What’s considered best practice by the federal government, however, is ending homelessness by treating and transitioning homeless people into permanent housing. Federal and local governments fund community coalitions and non-profits that locate, treat and house homeless people. Some buy and refurbish shelters.

That’s how communities such as Miami-Dade County have been successful in reducing the homeless population. In 1992, the county created the nation’s first dedicated funding source for homeless services using a 1% food and beverage tax. Since then, the county has gone from

more than 8,000 homeless people to less than 1,000.



Florida Governor Ron DeSantis speaks before signing the HB 1365 bill “to keep Florida’s streets safe”, at a press conference at the Santorini by Georgios Restaurant, in South Beach. The HB 1365 bill requires counties to ensure that homeless individuals receive the mental health and drug addiction services they need while residing in a designated location off our public streets, prioritizing public safety on Tuesday March 20, 2024.

Without a strategy to end homelessness, some fear HB 1365 will lead to lawless and unsafe camps.

That’s [what happened in Gainesville](#) in 2014, when the city moved homeless people out of downtown and into a camp near a homeless shelter. The city provided water, meals and police, but without structure or strategy, chronic homelessness, drug use and violence increased. The camp was shut down within five years.

Miami-Dade County shows that a housing-first approach to homelessness works, said Jesse Rabinowitz, communications director at the National Homelessness Law Center.

“We have clear proof that Florida does have the tools for homelessness, but they choose not use them,” Rabinowitz said.