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Commentary: Florida's future depends on compassionate response to homelessness



Dr. Tiffany Manuel (DrT), left, and her mother attend a rally to address homelessness and a recent Supreme Court case on April 22 in downtown Orlando. (Courtesy of Dr. Tiffany Manuel)

By [Dr. Tiffany Manuel](#)

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On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court heard *Grants Pass v. Johnson*, heard a case that hinges on whether it's legal to criminalize homelessness — in a country where millions are unable to find housing they truly can afford.

The case matters for Floridians because the court's decision, in a few months, will have bearing on our state's new "anti-camping" legislation, set to go in effect in October, and local municipalities' ongoing, urgent efforts to support those without a roof over their heads.

As a working mom of two teenage boys, who has personally experienced what it means to not have a place to call home, I care very deeply about this issue. The smartest investment we can make is in helping our neighbors who may be unhoused, and letting them know through our compassionate response to their hardship that they are loved and cared for.

I'm working hard with neighbors all over Central Florida to do everything we can to ensure that every person — no matter where they come from or what brought them here — has a place to live. That means working with local shelters, advocacy organizations and developers who want to build affordable housing in our region — to have the resources they need to do so.

I see more people, ordinary neighbors, coming together every day to make sure that we have more abundant housing options today than what we had yesterday, so that every day, more people get to experience the best of what this community has to offer. Organizations like Lift Orlando (and their campaign [Love is Local](#)); the Florida League of Women Voters; Habitat for Humanity Greater Orlando and Osceola County; the Florida Coalition for the Homeless; Florida Housing Coalition and many others have been actively working to engage people from all walks of life and calling diverse groups of people together in compassionate response.

Solutions to these issues aren't always easy but they exist, they work, and they are often less destructive and less costly than what we see playing out today.

What Florida needs now is to do at least three things: Address the growing shortage of affordable housing — especially as our state continues to experience explosive growth; address emergency shelter needs that are making it impossible to keep people from sleeping on the streets (legislative bans aren't effective if those who are without shelter have nowhere to go); and get more people in our state — ordinary Floridians — to understand why more people are living on our streets and to help create better solutions.

Those steps won't just make a difference when they are put in place, they will have lasting impacts. As the cost of housing is rising (outpacing income growth), if we don't get in front of the housing trends we're seeing, we'll be in for a long ride of deeper economic challenges.

I'm working with others to end homelessness in Florida because I want a better future for my teenage boys. I don't want my silence or inaction on this issue to be the thing that resigns them to a lifetime of hardship because housing costs continue to skyrocket and compassionate responses to homelessness are abandoned.

Just as importantly, I want a better future for the people who are unhoused tonight, who will sleep in shelters, on park benches, or the couches of friends.

What an incredible legacy to leave to the next generation of Floridians to say we refused to saddle them with a housing system that didn't work and that instead, we gave them better, more abundant options.

We all know a home is the foundation for a good life, no matter who you are—and we live in one of the most prosperous nations in the world. We can make the choice to do better by asking everyone in our community — every business, every church, every policymaker, every nonprofit, every trade organization, every neighbor — to prioritize this issue. Joining with organizations like the [Florida Coalition to End Homelessness](#) is a start in that direction but actually, any effort you take to support compassionate responses to homelessness would be welcomed.

Unless we figure out how to make our housing systems work better and for everyone, very few of us will get to live in the kind of thriving and compassionate communities we all deserve. Let's not take homelessness into Florida's future.

Tiffany Manuel is the founder of [TheCaseMade](#), which trains leaders to make the case for social justice, a national expert on housing policy, and is in the newest cohort of leaders in Leadership Orlando.