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## **Publicly Funded Arenas to Serve as Homeless Shelters: Bill**

*Proposal approved by Senate panel*

Picture a homeless person spending the night in Micky Arison's suite at the American Airlines Arena or a vagrant cozying up on Jeff Loria's couch in the new Miami Marlins Stadium.

Far-fetched? Seems like it. But it might not be as implausible as it initially appears if lawmakers manage to push enforcement of an obscure state law which requires arenas and stadiums built with taxpayer money to serve as homeless shelters on nights when no official events are being held.



The law has been on the books in Florida for 23-years but Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, a longtime critic of using taxpayer dollars to pay for new stadiums, says it has never been enforced.

So he wants the stadiums and arenas -- and the sports teams that use them -- to return as much as nearly \$275 million they have received from the state over the last two decades.

The provision could impact pro teams like the Miami Heat, Miami Dolphins, Miami Marlins and Florida Panthers, as well as other pro franchises across the state, although some disagree.

Ron Book, a lobbyist who represents Sun Life Stadium, the home to the Dolphins, contends that Bennett's bill would not apply to many South Florida sports teams because counties there have homeless plans in place and a dedicated source of funding.

Bennett, however, said that pro teams need to realize that it is difficult for state lawmakers to vote to cut state funding for education and health care at the same time it is paying millions to professional sports teams. He even warned that he has already talked to an outside lawyer about the possibility of a class-action lawsuit against the franchises.

"Since they always want to talk about sportsmanship and playing by the rules, we want to find out if they really want to play by the rules," he said.

A Senate panel on Monday backed Bennett when it voted unanimously in favor of his bill which would require the teams to refund the state all the money they have received by the end of the year if they can't prove the stadium has been used as a homeless shelter.

Bennett also added another twist: He included on Monday a provision being pushed by fellow Republican Sen. Mike Fasano that would fine any sports franchise that receives public support and allows its games to be blacked out on local television. The \$125,000 fine would then be used to purchase tickets for foster children and members of the military so they could attend games.

The National Football League is the only professional league that requires blackouts. The NFL policy applies to stations within a 75-mile radius of where the game is played if all tickets are not sold 72 hours in advance of kickoff. NFL officials have defended the policy as a way to help NFL teams sell tickets.

It's unclear how far the bill will move this session since professional teams have been successful in past years opposing legislation that would take away or end the state's tax subsidy program. Florida pays up to \$2 million a year to stadiums and arenas that have deals with pro sports franchises. There is also a similar program that offers up to \$500,000 to spring training facilities.

The argument behind the tax subsidies is that it is an economic development incentive meant to entice sports franchises to lock in long-term deals to stay in one location.

"We have spent over \$300 million supporting teams that can afford to pay a guy \$7, \$8, \$10 million a year to throw a baseball 90 feet, I think that they can pay for their own stadium," Bennett said.

While the prospect of having the indigent spend some time in arenas and stadiums worth hundreds of millions of dollars may be used as leverage for other purposes, some advocates of the homeless believe the issue is not addressing the core issue.

**Among them is Stephanie Berman of Carrfour Supportive Housing, a nonprofit developer that provides permanent housing and supportive services for the formerly homeless in Miami-Dade.**

**"More effort and focus should be placed on developing long-term solutions rather than short-term fixes," Berman said in a statement regarding the issue.**

**"Instead of putting a band aid on the problem as this would do, let's invest resources in providing permanent housing for the homeless."**