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Appropriations Committee
Oversight Committee on Pensions
Transportation and the Environment
Subcommittee
Joint Committee on Ending
Homelessness
Joint Committee on Pensions

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**HB 206 - UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN NEED OF SHELTER
AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICES**

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

Delegate Carol Krimm

**By Request – Workgroup to Study Shelter and Supportive Services for
Unaccompanied Homeless Minors**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE BILL?

House Bill 206 authorizes unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness to consent to shelter and supportive services. The bill also sets the process for a service provider to register with the Department of Housing and Community Development for purpose of providing services to homeless youth.

WHY IS THIS BILL NECESSARY?

Each year, thousands of minor youth in Maryland experience homelessness while unaccompanied, or not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. During the 2016-17 school year, Maryland public schools identified 2,337 unaccompanied homeless students. Schools in Prince George's County, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, Montgomery County, and Frederick County identified the highest number of unaccompanied homeless students at that time. 40% of the rural homeless youth population identifies as LGBTQ.

When unaccompanied homeless youth cannot access safe shelter and housing services, they are extremely vulnerable to victimization including: a higher risk for sex trafficking; increased interaction with the criminal justice system; and at higher risks for undiagnosed and untreated mental health and addiction needs. Without these services:

- 70% of homeless youth report experiencing some form of violence, 32% of which includes sexual assault.
- 40% of homeless youth are victims of sex trafficking at least once in a single year.
- In a recent study, 50% of homeless youth reported prescription drug misuse.

Homeless youth often turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism when they cannot access appropriate services.

- Homeless youth are 7.2 times more likely to attempt suicide than their housed peers.

Despite the pressing need for shelter for unaccompanied homeless youth in our state, Maryland currently has only three federally-funded shelter programs serving them. These programs provide invaluable support, but with locations only in Baltimore City and Prince George's County and a limited number of beds, it is clear that we need more similar programs to serve youth across the state.

While the federally-funded shelter programs have operated effectively for years, many Maryland non-profit organizations choose not to shelter unaccompanied homeless minors because it is unclear under Maryland law whether minors can consent to shelter services. House Bill 206 in response to requests from service providers who wish to shelter unaccompanied homeless minors and requested clarity in the law. This bill simply codifies the practice of the federally-funded youth shelters and provides clear guidance to other non-profit organizations that wish to provide this much needed resource.

House Bill 206 will:

- Establish that an unaccompanied minor in need of shelter has the same capacity as an adult to consent to shelter and supportive services;
- Require shelter providers to notify parents or guardians within 72 hours of admitting an unaccompanied homeless minor, consistent with federal law;
- Require shelter providers to follow Maryland's mandatory reporting laws by notifying child welfare agencies of any suspected abuse or neglect; and
- Establish that shelter providers are not liable for civil damages or subject to any criminal or disciplinary penalties solely due to serving an individual who is a minor.

By providing clarity in the law, HB 206 will result in the creation of more emergency shelter resources for unaccompanied homeless minors. Allowing minors to access shelter and services will ensure they are able to get off the street and receive help returning home or connecting to child welfare services before they become victims of dangerous predators and human traffic.

Thank you for your attention. I request a favorable report.

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HB 206 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

Organization Membership on Workgroup to Study Shelter and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Minors

State Agencies:

Department of Housing and Community Development
Department of Human Services
Department of Juvenile Services
Maryland Department of Health
Maryland State Department of Education
Governor's Office for Children

Non-State Organizations/Agencies:

Prince George's County Continuum of Care
Youth Empowered Society (YES) Drop-in Center
Student Homelessness Initiative Partnership (SHIP) of Frederick County
Baltimore County Continuum of Care
Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc.
Frederick County Department of Social Services
Advocates for Children and Youth
Loving Arms, Inc.
Southern Maryland Continuum of Care
Latin American Youth Center*
NAACP Maryland*

*These organizations were invited, but didn't participate in any meetings.

Most adults counted in annual tally of homelessness, but many children were not

Petula Dvorak, The Washington Post | January 23, 2020

WASHINGTON - It was 30 degrees on Wednesday night, and David Putney said it was one of his best evenings in a long time.

Dressed in a padded, mustard-yellow full-body jumpsuit he used to wear when he worked in construction, he was still cold. And he asked whether we could stand above a sidewalk grate to talk. It was about 20 degrees warmer in the cloud of dank grate air.

He had just endured an intimate 10-minute interrogation from one of the volunteers who fanned out across the city in the annual ritual of trying to count the Americans experiencing homelessness on a single night.

"What is your sexual orientation, sir?" the volunteer asked. "Huh?" said Putney, 64.

"Are you straight? Bi?" she said.

"Oh. Straight. I'm straight," he replied. And he went on through more questions about abuse, addiction, disease - a comprehensive survey to understand more about the homeless population. When he was done, the volunteers gave him a \$10 gift card to McDonald's for his time. And they even got one of the counselors he has worked with - at 11:30 at night - on the phone to talk with him.

"This makes me feel like I'm not forgotten," he said.

But this column isn't going to be all about Putney or guys like him.

The folks sleeping in cardboard boxes, tents and sleeping bags on streets don't have to answer all the questions Putney answered. Some get hostile about the interrogation. Some just wave the questions away. And I was most surprised that plenty of them - sometimes 50% of an encampment - refuse to be counted.

So let's talk about the ones we don't see.

Counting the real number of people experiencing homelessness is difficult. There are the folks like Putney, or the residents of the sprawling tent city in a gentrifying part of town who were recently moved out.

They want to be seen, helped, remembered.

But there is also an elusive, vulnerable population in the homeless community that wasn't counted in the nationwide January survey. They hide, they fudge the truth, they get off the bus at random stops, walk two extra blocks and never hang out with their better-off friends after school. They're homeless kids.

And they are gravely undercounted, according to some folks who are trying to change that.

"The situations we hear about are really unsafe - a small child sleeping on a couch, a child sleeping on the floor, Mom's staying with a bad boyfriend," said Cara Baldari, who works on family economics for First Focus on Children, a D.C.-based nonprofit group.

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development released numbers last month trumpeting a 5% decrease in the number of homeless families with kids since 2018 and a 32% drop since 2010. The folks at First Focus say that's baloney.

They contend the number is actually 27 times what HUD says. And that's not just coming from a bunch of big-hearted social-services softies. The much higher number comes from another federal agency - the Education Department, which counts homeless kids attending public schools.

This brings us back to that cold night this week and why we met guys like Putney.

The folks living in tents and boxes and warming themselves on the grates are counted in the nationwide Point in Time count. It happens on a night in January in cities across the nation. That is the number that HUD uses - paired with the number of folks checked into shelters that same night - to issue its official count.

It becomes the standard most of America uses when talking about homelessness.

Kids who aren't in shelters are rarely on the streets. They're tucked away on other people's couches or floors, in a car or sleeping in a mother's arms on an all-night bus or train.

Moms might pool together their cash to get a cheap motel room for a night so all the kids will be inside. "We saw one room with 12 kids in it," one counselor told me.

I talked to a young woman who experienced homelessness for most of her childhood.

She slept on friends' floors, hooked up with older men so she could stay with them, lived like she was in her 20s when she was only a young teen. But no statistic ever showed her as homeless. She didn't tell counselors, teachers or friends.

"We got kicked out when I was 11, maybe 12," said the woman, who is now 21, in her own apartment and working as a teaching aide. Seeking a clean slate, she asked that I not use her name. "It was either me in one room in a shelter with my brothers, my mom and her boyfriend, or me on my own."

So where do all the kids who have no place to call home at night go during the day?

School.

While HUD said it counted 114, 829 homeless kids younger than 18, the Education Department reported 1.3 million homeless children in public schools during the same time in the 2016-2017 school year. That's the number 27 times the HUD estimate.

And what makes it worse? The Education Department's numbers have grown 10% over two years.

So why does this matter?

It goes beyond the outrage of seeing a government claiming success when we're actually failing American children.

The real crisis is about money. The HUD numbers determine assistance, housing and programs.

If the numbers are low, the need for affordable housing looks low. See how the crisis snowballs? There is legislation to address this - the bipartisan Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 2001). Which, of course, is held up in Congress.

It's a complicated bill, but mostly it would amend an existing act to fix the HUD count and expand the definition of homelessness. Because a kid who sleeps on a floor one night, on a bus the next and doubled up in a friend's shelter bed another night isn't considered homeless in the government's eyes. This bill would change that.

Thanks to the conversation on that cold night, the District of Columbia government knows about Putney, the guy sleeping outside on a sidewalk near the White House. They know what he needs, who he is and what his circumstances are.

But that night, there were thousands of kids across America who don't have a home, a room or a bed to call their own, and who stayed invisible to the rest of the country.

It's time to find better ways to see them.