

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
HB 1149 – Department of Housing and Community Development – Social
Housing Subprogram (Social Housing Act)**

**Environment and Transportation Committee
February 28, 2020**



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 1149, which would create a Social Housing Subprogram within the Partnership Rental Housing Program operated by the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Housing is a significant determinant of health. Poor housing conditions are associated with many adverse health outcomes in both adults and children, according to a well-established body of evidence. These include, but are not limited to: a) infectious diseases such as respiratory infections, tuberculosis, and HIV; b) chronic illnesses such as asthma and cardiovascular disease; c) chronic health problems from toxic exposures, such as asbestos and lung cancers, or lead poisoning and neurodevelopmental deficits; d) injuries, especially falls and burns; e) mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance misuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder; and f) poor nutrition (1-4).

These risks and consequences can be accentuated for the homeless, whose definition is broad but includes people who lack a dwelling fit for habitation (3,5). Furthermore, homelessness itself predisposes people to a substantial increase in mortality, estimated by some studies as 2-5 times higher than that of the general population (3). Homelessness also increases the acute use of health services (3). Therefore, providing adequate housing is a public health priority of global concern as well as local significance.

The right to adequate housing is also closely related to social and health disparities. Certain populations are disproportionately vulnerable to barriers in exercising their right to adequate housing, as well as to the adverse health outcomes of inadequate housing. (1,2,6). These populations include but are not limited to the homeless, women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and low-income families and communities (1,2,6,8). In the United States, the homeless population is estimated at around 3 million annually, and nearly 18 million individuals have housing costs that consume more than half of their family income (1,3). In Maryland, the average rent of a 1-bedroom apartment is 167% of a monthly Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payment, a proportion higher than that of most other states (9).

Importantly, improving access to adequate housing and housing conditions is correlated with improved health outcomes, supported by a growing body of evidence. For example, provision of supportive housing reduced hospital use by chronically ill homeless adults, and improved quality of life for homeless individuals with serious mental illnesses (4). Provision of permanent housing to homeless individuals with HIV led to improved survival (10). Children living in public housing were found to have better mental health outcomes compared to those on waitlists for public housing, according to a recent study by public health researchers at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University (11). In light of the importance of adequate housing, the World Health Organization published guidelines in 2018 to address six priorities of improving housing: crowding, low indoor temperatures, high indoor temperatures, insulation, injury hazards, and housing accessibility (7).

Homelessness exists, in large part, because there is simply not enough affordable housing. Maryland faces a shortage of 118,810 affordable and accessible rental units for extremely low income households. However, homelessness is not permanent and it is not an intractable problem. The creation of more affordable housing is not only achievable but must occur in order to tackle the crisis of homelessness in our State. HB 1149 is an enormous step to help us get there. We urge a favorable report.

Therefore, Health Care for the Homeless respectfully requests a favorable report on this bill.

References:

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Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.