

FEBRUARY 14, 2023

TO: MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES

FROM: LAUREL E. WALKER

17426 SWANN ROAD

HAGERSTOWN, MD 21740

RE: WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO HB577

Good afternoon everyone:

Nearly 70 years ago (1955) my parents, Jim and Ellen Resh, answered God's call to establish the Hagerstown Rescue Mission (currently known as The Hope Center). With 5 young children in tow they left a lovely home and a comfortable lifestyle to move into central Hagerstown where they provided food, clothing, shelter, and most importantly life-changing spiritual help through sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to men, women, boys and girls. I have been involved in some capacity since it was founded in May of 1955. In the past I was office manager and director of public relations. Currently I am a weekly volunteer as well as Treasurer of the Board of Directors.

The doors of this ministry have been open continuously 24 hours a day, 365 days a year since its inception in 1955. Although they do provide shelter to homeless men, this ministry was not established as a "homeless shelter"; they operate as a multi-faceted ministry aiding the less fortunate and needy in our community along with offering an in-depth rehabilitation program for individuals struggling with addictions.

This organization has been in operation doing much good for the community without receiving any tax-payer funding, and The Hope Center has always been in full compliance with all federal, state, county and city laws and regulations, and they meet (or exceed) all regulations.

The proposed legislation in HB577 will require licensure for homeless shelters along with strong state mandated regulations that goes beyond and infringes on the first amendment rights of Christian homeless shelters. This requirement for licensure is major government overreach that could force changes to their faith-based policies which could potentially cause them to shut down. Closing the doors of this faith-based organization would seriously increase the homeless situation in our city and surrounding area.

Some statistics from the year 2023:

8,338 Items of Clothing given

898 food bags given (20+ pounds per bag)

53,685 meals served

17,899 overnight beds provided

This nearly 70 year non profit organization, operating in full compliance with all laws and regulations, has been a lighthouse of HOPE in our city and surrounding area. They should not be subject to licensure by the State of Maryland.

I strongly and emphatically OPPOSE HB577 and request that if HB577 is passed, there would be an exemption for The Hope Center which provides a vital service to the homeless, unemployed, under-employed, less fortunate and needy individuals who desperately need and rely on these services. This organization has stood the test of time in providing a hand up to the needy while meeting all requirements and existing laws and being fully funded by caring friends of The Hope Center who also want to help.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my opposition to this proposed legislation.

Very sincerely,

Laurel Walker

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Hagerstown, MD 21740

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