

HB0577 – Department of Housing and Community Development – Homeless Shelter Licensing Program – Establishment

**Hearing before the Environment & Transportation Committee on
February 16, 2024**

Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Arundel House of Hope asks you to issue a favorable report on SB1107, with the addition of amendments to address the concerns noted below.

Arundel House of Hope provides homeless services in Anne Arundel County and has been providing these services since 1992 and is one of the largest homeless providers in Anne Arundel County. Arundel House of Hope provides emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing as well as many support services for those experiencing homelessness in Anne Arundel County. Our longest serving program is our “Winter Relief Emergency Shelter” that operates at over 60 local congregations. This program typically provides over 8,000 bed-nights, and over 15,000 meals, mostly through volunteers and donations. This program only operates during the Winter months from November through March and provides a safe warm location for those experiencing homelessness, each one of our over 60+ member congregations host for one week, usually at two different locations, allowing us to shelter 40-50 individuals and then it moves to another pair of congregations. This is an extremely cost effective and resourceful program that uses already available space that is not being used, donated food, and volunteers. Not only does this program provide a vital service of sheltering those that are experiencing homelessness, but it also exposes the issues of homelessness to those volunteering (including many children) at the hosting sites. This program changes many people's perspective on what being homeless is and is not and what the causes of homelessness really are.

We support the goal of this bill, ensuring that all homeless shelters in Maryland provide safe, accessible shelter for those in need. However, we ask that this bill be amended to address the following concerns:

1. To meet the need for additional overnight shelter during the winter months, Anne Arundel County coordinates a collaborative effort that involves many interfaith organizations making their facilities available on a rotating basis for overnight shelter for homeless individuals. The program, called “Winter Relief,” has been in place for many years. More than 60 churches and synagogues volunteer to help for at least one week per year, providing overnight shelter and free meals for homeless individuals in need. This is a resource our county relies on to meet critical needs that otherwise could not be met. We are concerned that Winter Relief would be adversely affected by the new licensing requirements. Standards may be out of reach for the locations and/or the inspection and other administrative requirements may cause the locations to withdraw from participation. We would like to see an

amendment to this bill that would specifically **exempt Anne Arundel County's Winter Relief Program from being covered by the legislation** or that would specifically address the concerns noted above.

2. We are also concerned that setting up blanket minimum compliance standards for admissions and services will mean we cannot tailor admission and service criteria for the targeted population we serve and the special circumstances we face. For example, if the bill requires all shelters to not allow the use of a breathalyzer upon entrance into the shelter, then all shelters in the State of Maryland would be considered a "wet shelter" which allows people to be admitted while under the influence of alcohol. In our over 25 years of experience this policy would not only adversely affect the hosting congregations and its volunteers (including children), but also the other participants in the program that are trying to remain sober and not be around those that are currently abusing alcohol or are intoxicated. We currently screen for alcohol and that helps ensure a level of safety for our congregations, volunteers, and other participants in the program. Arundel House of Hope offers a "Warming Center" where on freezing nights, we open our Day and Resource Center to allow those that may not be able, because they are under the influence of alcohol, or do not want to go into our Winter Relief program a safe-warm place to get out of the weather. Our staff are specifically trained and have the experience working with these participants to ensure their safety and the safety of the other participants.
3. Arundel House of Hope is also concerned about these licensing and requirements as they are currently stated in HB577, would cause an undue burden on our member congregations. Thus, causing Arundel House of Hope to not only lose existing congregations that currently host, but also make it more difficult to recruit new congregations, thus decreasing the number of available beds for those experiencing homelessness. This new legislation may create more liability issues for our congregations, its members, and volunteers.

For the reasons stated above, we ask that you issue a Favorable report, with amendments to address the concerns noted above.