

**Bill:** HB0577, Department of Housing and Community Development - Homeless Shelter Licensing Program - Establishment

**Position:** Favorable

**Submitted By:** Michele Copper; michele.m.copper@gmail.com

I am writing to **support** HB0577, Department of Housing and Community Development - Homeless Shelter Licensing Program - Establishment.

I support HB0577 because if passed, it would protect the rights of unhoused people seeking shelter and require homeless shelters to maintain a license that would hold them to a certain standard.

It is crucial that the state establishes minimal standards of care for shelters operating in the State of Maryland. Currently, there are wide discrepancies in delivery of services across the state, with shelters that do not receive state or federal funding providing in some instances substandard care and inconsistent services.

As the Founder and prior Executive Director of PFLAG Salisbury, a local grassroots LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, I saw during my 5-year affiliation with the organization a dire need for legislation such as HB0577. The systemic barriers facing LGBTQ+ people mean that they are disproportionately more likely to be unhoused at some point in their lives. While serving as Executive Director, I was often approached by LGBTQ+ people who were either unhoused or on the brink of becoming unhoused. I was unfortunately unable to connect them with housing services in most instances. This is because, here in our area, the majority of shelters operate in ways which are openly discriminatory against LGBTQ+ people. I have had LGBTQ+ people report to me that they approached area shelters for services, and were either directly turned away, or, if provided services, were provided services in a discriminatory manner. For instance, in one case, a transgender person chose to leave the shelter and remain unhoused as the shelter was not willing to acknowledge their gender.

I am aware that some shelters are opposing this legislation on the grounds that it would prohibit them from promoting religion in the context of providing services. Contrary to popular belief, accepting state and federal funds does not mean a shelter cannot promote religion; they just cannot enforce that participation in a particular religion is a requirement of receiving services. This bill would not mean that the state is taking away the rights of shelters; rather, the bill would protect the rights of people that those shelters are presumably looking to serve.

It is for this reason that I support HB0577 and request a **favorable** report in committee.