

**DATE:** February 14, 2024  
**BILL NO.:** House Bill 577  
**TITLE:** Homeless Shelter Licensing Program  
**COMMITTEE:** House Environment and Transportation Committee

### Letter of Support

#### **Description of Bill:**

House Bill 577 establishes a homeless shelter licensing program in the Department of Housing and Community Development, requiring that shelters be relicensed every 2 years. The bill requires the Department to develop certain operational and building standards for homeless shelters and minimum standards for the protection of the rights of shelter residents. The bill also authorizes the Department to implement an administrative penalty of up to \$10,000 for each violation of operating a homeless shelter without a license or in violation of certain regulations.

#### **Background and Analysis:**

Over 32,000 Marylanders experienced homelessness in FY2023. Approximately 16% of individuals were unsheltered, 67% were in emergency shelters, and 17% were in transitional shelters. Emergency and transitional shelters serve Maryland's most vulnerable citizens, who are at the highest risk of contracting illnesses, have chronic health conditions and disabilities, and who rely on shelters to meet their most basic needs for nutrition, personal hygiene, and sleeping accommodations. Shelters also serve highly vulnerable populations with complex needs, such as people fleeing domestic violence (8%), children under 18 (20%), older adults (26%), and chronically homeless individuals with a disability (18%). Due to this high level of vulnerability and nature of the care being provided, it is critical that shelters operate with a minimum set of standards for habitability, quality of care, and staff and volunteers that are appropriately trained and equipped to meet the needs of households.

Of the over 190 emergency and transitional shelters in operation across Maryland, only 68 are funded by the State and have mandated standards and regular monitoring for compliance. The remaining shelters are funded by local government or private organizations, and subject to minimal local laws or regulations - or in some cases, none at all (including basic zoning, fire, health, and occupancy requirements). DHCD receives outreach from individuals every day regarding situations where they have been denied entry into shelter based on their membership in a protected class, terminated from program services unfairly or in violation of federal laws, or experienced trauma and mistreatment while staying in shelter.

If the bill is enacted, DHCD intends to engage community partners to design the regulations and licensing application process - including Continuums of Care, shelter service providers, local governments, and other state agencies. The Department intends to develop a tiered/class-based system of shelter licensing, that reflects the wide variety of types of shelters. The Department will also implement training and technical assistance for service providers on the new regulations and how to come into compliance, in addition to providing an opportunity for corrective action prior to the implementation of any fees.

#### **DHCD Position:**

House Bill 577 ensures that shelters provide a consistent and quality level of care across the State, and that people experiencing homelessness have rights and remedies when shelters violate those standards. The Department of Housing and Community Development respectfully requests a **favorable** report on HB 577.