



January 21, 2025

Housing Our Neighbors
Baltimore City, 21201

TESTIMONY ON SB234 - POSITION: FAVORABLE

**Housing and Community Development – Homeless Shelter Certification Program
– Establishment**

TO: Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

FROM: Housing Our Neighbors

Our names are Mark Council and James Crawford. We are residents of Baltimore City and are the lead organizers and co-founders of Housing Our Neighbors, a collective of community members and activists who advocate to end homelessness in Baltimore City. We are submitting this testimony in support of SB234 for the establishment of the Housing Shelter Certification Program on behalf of our organization and community.

Housing Our Neighbors' goal is to ensure accessible, quality housing for all community members. We believe that housing is a human right. Housing provides security, dignity, and well-being. In 2020, we led a campaign called "Empty the Shelters," which highlighted the inhumane living conditions of Baltimore City Shelters at the height of the covid pandemic.

Many of our members live or have lived in the homeless shelters that this bill seeks to address. HON Outreach Team members also speak with residents at Baltimore City shelters each month, and continuously hear stories of dehumanizing conditions and mistreatment by staff. Many liken the conditions at city shelters to those of a prison. **Some recent concerns we have heard from residents include:**

- Residents being removed from the shelter at night and during freezing weather for minor issues, such as exceeding the number of personal items they are allowed to bring into the shelter.
- Residents' personal possessions being confiscated or stolen by staff members.

- Residents warehoused in buildings without working air conditioning or heat, and moved from building to building around the city without notice or explanation.
- Unsanitary conditions such as mold, broken washing machines and showers, and lack of working hot water.
- Retaliation by staff members for complaining or attempting to have concerns addressed.

The Homeless Shelter Certification will improve the quality of living for the most vulnerable members of society by developing a shelter bill of rights, establishing minimum standards for the protection of those rights, and implementing a clear grievance process for residents. Current shelter policies subject individuals to further harm, mistreating and discriminating against residents, causing some to choose to sleep outside rather than be abused. The Homeless Shelter Certification Program will establish processes for holding shelters accountable so individuals won't have to pick between sleeping outdoors or being put in harm's way in shelters. It is the state's duty to protect our basic rights to housing, health, and safety. **For that reason, we respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB234.**