

My name is Cristi Richardson, and I am the Community Support Manager for Wicomico Public Libraries, where I work directly with individuals experiencing homelessness in Salisbury, Maryland. Additionally, I serve on the board of directors for a local emergency shelter and actively advocate for policies that support vulnerable community members. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of SB 234 , which seeks to establish a homeless shelter certification program within the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Implementing operational and building standards for homeless shelters, along with minimum protections for shelter residents, is a critical step to ensure the safety, dignity, and well-being of some of our most vulnerable neighbors. In my daily work, I witness firsthand the struggles individuals face when shelters operate without clear guidelines or accountability measures. Without standardized practices, the quality of services varies widely, and residents are often left without adequate recourse when their rights are violated.

It is also important to highlight that some shelters in the area discriminate based on sexual orientation, offender status of previously incarcerated individuals, individuals with substance use disorders, and at will for mental health disorders and disabilities. These discriminatory practices perpetuate homelessness and create significant, unnecessary barriers for individuals who are already in crisis. Establishing clear and enforceable standards is essential to addressing these inequities and ensuring that shelters are places of refuge and support for all.

By requiring a certification program, this bill would:

1. **Promote Consistency and Quality:** Establishing operational and building standards ensures that shelters provide safe, hygienic, and supportive environments. These standards will help eliminate disparities in service provision and ensure all residents receive equitable care.
2. **Protect Resident Rights:** Homeless individuals are often in precarious situations and deserve the same protections as any other community member. Minimum standards for resident rights will affirm their dignity and provide mechanisms to address grievances, creating an environment that fosters trust and stability.
3. **Enhance Data-Driven Solutions:** Mandating participation in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) will improve data collection and analysis, allowing stakeholders to identify gaps in services, track progress, and make informed decisions to better address homelessness. Comprehensive data is essential for tailoring interventions and securing funding for critical programs.

The certification program proposed in this bill aligns with best practices in shelter management and upholds a commitment to improving outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. It also strengthens the capacity of community partners, like emergency shelters and support organizations, to effectively meet the complex needs of their residents.

As someone who interacts daily with unhoused individuals, I cannot overstate the importance of ensuring that shelters operate with integrity, compassion, and accountability. This bill represents a necessary investment in our homeless service infrastructure and will pave the way for a more just and equitable system.

I urge you to support SB 234 and ensure its swift passage. Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to improving the lives of our unhoused community members.

Sincerely,

Cristi Richardson  
Community Support Manager  
Wicomico Public Libraries  
Board Member, Hands and Hearts Ending Homelessness