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HB0093

Housing and Community Development – Homeless Shelter Certification Program – Establishment

Environment and Transportation Committee Hearing February 4, 2025

Position: FAVORABLE

To the Honorable Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

Community Legal Services (CLS) is a nonprofit legal services provider dedicated to assisting Maryland’s most under-represented populations, including individuals and families who are homeless and housing insecure. We strongly support House Bill 0093, which would establish a statewide certification program for homeless shelters.

As legal advocates for low-income and under-represented individuals and families, we have witnessed firsthand the essential role that emergency shelters play in providing a safe haven for those experiencing homelessness. However, the policies and conditions of these shelters can vary significantly, leaving many individuals without equal access to shelter or leaving them exposed to substandard and, at times, unsafe environments. House Bill 0093 offers a critical solution by creating a uniform certification process to ensure all shelters meet basic standards of care and safety.

The Need for Statewide Certification

Currently, Maryland lacks a standardized regulatory framework governing homeless shelters, leading to inconsistencies in service provision. While many shelters operate with the highest levels of integrity and compassion, others lack the necessary resources or oversight to guarantee adequate conditions for residents. We have had clients report issues such as overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, lack of access to essential services, and even discriminatory practices that prevent certain individuals, such as those with disabilities or LGBTQ+ individuals, from receiving equitable support.

House Bill 0093 would address these concerns by:

Establishing Baseline Standards: A statewide certification program would ensure that all shelters adhere to minimum requirements regarding health, safety, accessibility, and service provision.

Establishing a Mechanism for Oversight: Certification would provide a mechanism for oversight and accountability, ensuring that shelters are operating safely and providing services equitably.

Encouraging Best Practices: By setting clear expectations and offering support to shelters to meet these standards, the bill fosters an environment of continuous improvement in service delivery.

Legal Protections for Vulnerable Populations and Support for Shelter Providers

As a legal services provider, we are particularly concerned with the civil rights of individuals seeking shelter. A certification program would help prevent unlawful discrimination, ensure ADA compliance, and protect residents from unsafe or exploitative conditions. It would also support shelters in navigating complex legal and regulatory requirements, ultimately benefiting both service providers and the individuals they serve.

We Respectfully Request Your Support for HB0093

Maryland has an opportunity to lead the way in ensuring that individuals experiencing homelessness receive the dignity and protection they deserve so they can successfully regain their footing and head in a positive direction toward long-term housing stability. House Bill 0093 represents a necessary step toward a fair, consistent, and compassionate approach to shelter services. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report and advance this critical legislation.

Please feel free to reach out to Jessica Quincosa, Executive Director, or Lisa Sarro, Director of Litigation & Advocacy, with any questions at quincosa@clspgc.org, and sarro@clspgc.org, respectively.