

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for accepting my testimony in favor of House Bill 93.

My name is Cristi Richardson, and I serve as the Community Support Manager for a local library in Downtown Salisbury. I am also a board member of a local emergency cold weather shelter. My professional and personal experiences have deeply connected me with the unhoused population on the Eastern Shore. Through my work and advocacy, I witness firsthand the urgent need for regulations in our local shelter system.

I am often the person people turn to when they are denied shelter due to discriminatory practices. In many cases, I make phone calls on their behalf—not because they cannot, but because they have already endured enough. I witness the harsh words on the other end of the line so they don't have to.

With their permission, I will now share some of their stories.

Last week, I visited several large homeless encampments on the Eastern Shore—hidden from public view yet existing in our backyards. The individuals living in these encampments face even greater barriers than those in large cities due to limited transportation, scarce employment opportunities, and fragmented resources. Many have been homeless for years—one person for as long as 23 years—a clear and devastating sign of systemic failure.

In my county, there are only two year-round shelters. Both proudly display their refusal of state and federal funding on their websites to, as they say, “maintain their missions.” But what do these missions truly look like in practice?

- Two sisters came to me seeking shelter. They were newly homeless and unsure where to turn. When they contacted one of these shelters, staff expressed “concerns” that they were lesbians. They were denied shelter based on a false assumption of their sexuality.
- A family of five came to my office after being evicted. Together, we called the local shelter that claims to house families and children. It seemed promising—until the intake process revealed that the parents were not married. The shelter director then urged the couple to go to the courthouse and get married if they wanted to stay together as a family unit with their children.
- A transgender woman was denied shelter because she was deemed ‘dangerous to children’ despite having no criminal record or history of violence.
- Another transgender woman was placed on the men’s side of the shelter despite being female-presenting. There, she was sexually harassed by other guests and bullied by staff.
- Homelessness is often accompanied by trauma, addiction, violence, and despair. Yet, shelters regularly turn away individuals struggling with these realities. Last year, two of

my clients were found frozen to death just yards away from a local shelter—denied entry because of their substance use.

We receive no explanation when we contact these shelters to clarify their policies. There is no transparency in deciding who is deemed “fit” for shelter.

I do not share these stories lightly or intend to denounce the shelter system in our county, but there is a clear need for regulation and transparency. The lives and well-being of real people are at stake.

This is why House Bill 93 is so critical. It is time we establish regulations that ensure all individuals experiencing homelessness—regardless of their circumstances—have access to safe, nondiscriminatory shelter.

Thank you.