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Elisabet Eppes
417 Fawcett St.
Baltimore, Maryland 21211

TESTIMONY ON HB0093 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
**Housing and Community Development – Homeless Shelter Certification Program –
Establishment**

TO: Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee

FROM: Elisabet Eppes, MPH

My name is Elisabet Eppes. I am a resident of District 43A in Baltimore City. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0093 for the establishment of the Housing Shelter Certification Program.

I am an anti-hunger and public health advocate and have worked for over a decade to expand access to our federal nutrition programs, especially WIC. Good health and nutrition start with having a safe, stable place to live. I believe HB0093 presents an opportunity for the state to prioritize the health and wellbeing of Maryland residents facing housing insecurity. Unsafe and inhumane shelter conditions present a public health crisis which this bill will help to address.

While I have not personally experienced homelessness in Baltimore city, I've heard from members of Housing our Neighbors (HON), a Baltimore-based organization representing people with lived experience of homelessness, allies, and advocates. Many HON members who have spent time in shelters have spoken about inhumane and unsanitary conditions at many of the city's shelters. These conditions include lack of running hot water, lack of proper heating and insulation, moldy bathrooms, bedbugs and lice, substandard food, and inadequate accommodations for residents with disabilities. Members have reported being treated cruelly by shelter staff, suffering termination from shelters for minor infractions such as having too many items of clothing, and having no due process or grievance procedure. Physical violence is not uncommon, particularly for members of the LGBTQ+ community. All human beings deserve basic dignity and respect, which many of our homeless shelters are failing to provide.

The reason we need HB0093 is that, in short, homeless shelters in our state are not well-regulated. There is a patchwork of federal laws stipulating minimum requirements, but these do not apply to all shelters and their interpretation and enforcement are subject to the vagaries of each new presidential administration. There are no state or local laws in Maryland codifying any requirements such as non-discrimination, minimum operating standards, or minimum living conditions. In addition, according to the Maryland Homeless Shelter Certification Recommendations Phase 1 report published last month by the Department of Housing and Community Development, enforcement resources to respond to shelters who violate federal laws are extremely limited and are handled on an individual complaint basis. This is clearly inadequate. Phase 2 of the DCHD report, which will include input from diverse stakeholders regarding the Phase 1 findings, is due to be published in April. That makes the 2025

session the perfect time to pass this bill to allow the agency to begin implementation of the Shelter Certification program in July of this year.

While I recognize that we are in a tough budget year, the annual financial investment required to implement this bill (approximately \$250,000 in FY 2026; rising in small amounts in subsequent years) is miniscule compared to the positive impact it will have on the tens of thousands of Marylanders who are in need of shelter services. In addition to Housing Our Neighbors, this bill is also supported by key organizations serving the homeless population in our state including Healthcare for the Homeless and Homeless Persons Representation Project. These groups all recognize the dire need for clear, consistent standards for homeless shelters in our state, as well as oversight and enforcement mechanisms. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB0093.**