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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: Danielle Albrecht, MA

My name is Danielle Albrecht. I am a resident of District 02 in Carroll County. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0093 for the establishment of the Housing Shelter Certification Program.

I am a Senior Adjunct Lecturer in Philosophy at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland, where I have been teaching since Fall of 2019. I am also working in association with Housing Our Neighbors, a Baltimore-based organization representing the unhoused and their allies and advocates. In my time as a college instructor I have seen more than my fair share of students sleeping in their cars because they cannot afford housing. As a resident of the state of Maryland, I have seen how pervasive homelessness has become as more and more people find themselves unable to afford a home. I believe that no human being should have to choose between housing and dignity. Sadly, that is the choice that many of our most vulnerable residents currently face.

Our current system of providing temporary shelters is a patchwork assembly of organizations, each with its own goals, values, and rules. There is little meaningful coordination between these organizations, and less oversight. Shelter residents have few legal rights, and no legal recourse when these are violated. Lacking meaningful oversight, shelters are free to make their own rules and enforce these to whatever extent they wish. Residents who make complaints about the conditions in shelters, or the treatment they receive therein, often find themselves evicted - if not targeted for abuse. In such circumstances, residents have no meaningful way to protest their treatment.

The rules imposed by shelters can be arbitrary, and even cruel. What's more, these rules can and do interfere with residents' health and well-being. Many shelters maintain rules about how many possessions residents can have with them, and will evict residents if they have more than what the shelter allows. In theory this rule prevents overcrowding in facilities. But for the unhoused, their possessions are invaluable keepsakes, often maintaining critical ties to family and

community. One Housing Our Neighbors member shared with us that she was kicked out of her shelter for refusing to give up her grandmother's china. Our unhoused neighbors try their hardest to hold onto their family and community, but the rules imposed by shelters often pit this desire against the need for a safe place to sleep.

Within shelters themselves, residents encounter myriad risks to their health. Conditions within shelters can vary enormously, and while some shelters do maintain adequately clean and comfortable facilities, many shelter residents have spoken about the filthy bathrooms, poor quality food, poorly insulated rooms, and dirty bedclothes and towels which they are given to use. Lice and bedbugs are a constant problem, and the risk of infection to even small wounds is high. Violence within shelters is also a problem, as staff do little to protect shelter residents from violence against each other. Some shelter staff even participate in violence against residents.

These conditions proliferate in shelters because there are few legal standards to which shelters are held, and no mechanism for holding shelters accountable for meeting these standards. While there are some federal laws regarding the conditions in shelters, these come with little oversight or enforcement. Meanwhile, there are no state or local laws mandating minimal acceptable conditions in shelters. The unhoused have no meaningful way to raise complaints except to shelter staff - and when they do they often face retaliation. Without legal protection, shelter residents are completely at the mercy of shelter staff, who are left virtually unchecked in their authority within the shelters themselves. By establishing licensing requirements for shelters, our great state could ensure that the promise of equal protection reaches even our most vulnerable residents. Licensing requirements would ensure minimal acceptable standards for shelters, ensure uniformity in the conditions and rules residents could expect, and provide residents with legal protection in the form of enforcement and accountability for shelters.

Without minimal acceptable and enforceable standards, residents face malnutrition, disease, and abuse. People are dying. People will continue to die unless we decide to protect them. The first step in doing so is ensuring that there are minimal enforceable standards for their treatment, to which the agencies who provide them with food, housing, and all other basic necessities are held. Our unhoused neighbors should not be overlooked by the law any longer. Let us help them. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB0093.**