

February 4, 2024
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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: Deborah Hart

My name is Deborah Hart. I am a resident of District I am a resident of MD District 43A. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0093 for the establishment of the Housing Shelter Certification Program.

I am a member of Housing Our Neighbors, in Baltimore, a disabled army veteran, former police officer, and a person who has experienced homelessness. I became homeless in 2018 after losing my job and then my housing when I no longer had income.

When I first came to a shelter in Baltimore, I was treated inhumanely by the staff, who searched my belongings and my body without informing me. They spoke to me rudely and condescendingly, in what was already one of the worst moments in my life. I had purchased a new coat earlier that day, which for some reason the intake staff tried to take away from me. When I refused, another staff member allowed me to take the coat to my car instead. That night, I went to sleep in a poorly heated room, with only a thin-blanket to keep warm with. I shivered through the night. In the morning, I left that shelter and never went back, instead sleeping in my car until I lost access to that. From there, I began to sleep in a park in Elkridge.

After encountering an animal trying to get into my food in the park in 2019, I knew I needed to find somewhere safer to sleep. I went to the VA and let them know that I was experiencing homelessness. The Baltimore City VA then got me an Uber to a hotel on S Charles Street, which was being used as a temporary shelter. I learned upon arriving at that shelter that it was a men's shelter, but was assured that there was a security guard and I would be alright. I felt unsafe, understanding that some people there had recently been in jail, and was afraid to even leave my room.

Days later, a fellow resident gave me a hot chocolate which I later learned had been drugged with sedatives. I fought to keep my consciousness and lock myself safely in my room. That

resident offered me beverages multiple times afterward, which I always discarded. At this facility I was unable to shower because I have a disability, and there was no wheelchair or walker accessible shower. The shelter also had a terrible uncontrolled rodent problem, and a number of residents experienced having their medications stolen from their rooms. I stayed at that shelter far longer than a person should have to, waiting nearly a year until I was awarded a housing voucher that allowed me to move into my current apartment.

Shelter licensing would ensure that people like me are treated fairly in shelters, housed in safe conditions that are accessible for our disabilities, and treated like human beings. Stories like mine or worse are unfortunately not the exception, but the rule. I appreciate the committee's consideration and respectfully urge you to return a favorable report on HB0093.