



SUPPORT

SB 207 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

Hearing of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, February 5, 2020 Testimony of Christina Ralls, Director of Workforce Development and Social Enterprise

Art with a Heart's mission is to enhance the lives of people in need through visual art. Art with a Heart brings interactive visual arts classes into schools, community centers, group homes, shelters, permanent housing facilities, hospitals, and senior housing facilities. Founded in 2000, Art with a Heart has experienced steady growth, from four small classes a week to 12,000 annually, with a proven track record for developing creative initiatives and accessible paths to success for individuals living in Baltimore's most vulnerable communities. HeARTworks, Art with a Heart's workforce development program, uses marketable art as a vehicle to teach job and life skills to opportunity youth ages 14 to 24. Many of the youth we work with in HeARTworks are homeless and face countless barriers in acquiring employment. Art with a Heart is also a member organization of the Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative.

Art with a Heart supports the enactment of SB 207, which establishes that unaccompanied minors who are experiencing homelessness have legal capacity to consent to admission to sheltering programs registered with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development.

As an arts non-profit that works with homeless youth, Art with a Heart practitioners constantly see how the lack of shelter impacts youth participation and health, and also affects their employment opportunities and retention after program completion. Art with a Heart supports this bill because unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland need housing and supportive services to achieve safety, stability, and self-sufficiency. Passing SB 207 is a critical step towards addressing this issue.

SB 207 was developed and requested by the legislative Workgroup to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Minors, whose members included members of the Senate and House of Representatives; State agencies including the Departments of Human Services, Housing and Community development, Health, Education, and Juvenile Services; and geographically diverse community-based service providers and local homeless service systems. SB 207 will ensure that unaccompanied homeless minors in Maryland have increased access to safe shelter, which will also prevent human trafficking and other exploitation and will enable shelter providers to connect minors to child welfare services when eligible.

Art with a Heart strongly urges the committee to issue a Favorable Report on SB 207. Please contact Christina Ralls at Christina@artwithaheart.net or 410-366-8886 with any questions.

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