

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 207 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need Of Shelter and
Supportive Services

Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 5, 2020



Health Care for the Homeless supports the SB 207, which establishes that unaccompanied minors who are experiencing homelessness have legal capacity to consent to admission to emergency shelter.

As Maryland’s leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness, we serve the needs of the most vulnerable and underserved populations—including unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY). For reasons ranging from rejection due to sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, or disability, to exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems without skills or resources needed to live independently, these individuals are left without stable housing and the support of a parent or legal guardian. As a result, UHY are at a disproportionate risk for suicide, sex trafficking, delinquency, crime victimization, and health problems.

This is a stark reality in Maryland: during the 2016-17 school year, over two-thousand unaccompanied homeless students were identified in Maryland public schools, with the highest numbers in Prince George’s County, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, Montgomery County, and Frederick County.

Because UHY are often unable to access safe shelter, UHY are forced to live on the streets, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not meant for human habitation – or are “doubled up” or “couch surfing.” Some are forced to engage in high risk behaviors just to have a roof over their heads. Among the barriers for UHY accessing shelter is the fact that minors are not legally competent to contract for rental housing or a hotel room. The child welfare system is unable to provide housing and services for unaccompanied homeless minors who it determines do not meet the eligibility criteria for foster care services. The only private emergency shelters specifically serving unaccompanied homeless minors in Maryland are federally-funded “basic centers.” These programs are a critical and effective resource, but exist only in three Maryland counties and have very limited bed space.

Many Maryland non-profit organizations choose not to shelter unaccompanied homeless minors because it is unclear under Maryland law whether and how they can do so lawfully. SB 207 will clarify the law by establishing that an unaccompanied minor in need of shelter has the legal capacity to consent to shelter and supportive services. This would incentivize non-profit organizations to shelter this extremely vulnerable and underserved population—preventing sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Further, this law would require shelter providers to notify child welfare agencies of suspected abuse or neglect under Maryland’s reporting law, thereby connecting eligible UHY to child welfare services.

SB 207 incorporates the recommendations of the legislative Workgroup to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Minor, which included members of the General Assembly, State agencies, and service providers from across the state. As a result, the bill includes the requirement that shelter

providers serving UHY register with the state, notify parents or guardians consistent with longstanding federal regulations, and notify child welfare agencies of any abuse or neglect.

SB 207 is comprehensive and includes the recommendations from a number of diverse stakeholders. But the bottom line is that the **lack of legal capacity to consent to shelter is a life-threatening issue for Maryland's unaccompanied homeless youth**. SB 207 is critical for their safety, and for the prevention of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Health Care for the Homeless strongly urges the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 207.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.