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**Bill:** SB207  
**Title:** Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services  
**Date:** February 5, 2020  
**Committee:** Senate education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
**Position:** Support

To the Honorable Paul Pinsky McIntosh and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

FreeState Justice is a statewide legal advocacy organization that seeks to improve the lives of low-income lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (“LGBTQ”) Marylanders. We work across Maryland to provide free civil legal aid to LGBTQ Marylanders with low incomes who are facing discrimination.

FreeState Justice whole heartedly supports SB207, 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.

Based on national studies, 5% to 10% of youth identify as LGBT.<sup>1</sup> However, the disproportionate numbers of LGBT youth who experience homelessness in Maryland alone, demonstrate the strong need for safe spaces like emergency shelters. Of the estimated 2,425 youth who go to sleep without a stable living situation, or the support of a family member/guardian, 40% identify as LGBT.<sup>2</sup> LGBT homeless youth face greater risk factors leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, dangerous and unstable living situations, school drop-out, human trafficking, and to violence. These risk factors in turn lead to higher incidences of justice system involvement, unemployment, and health problems. SB207 will

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Equality Alliance, *Living in the Margins, A Report on the Challenges of LGBTQ Youth in Maryland Education, Foster Care, and Juvenile Justice Systems (2014)*.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, A., Unick, J., & Harburger, D.S. (2017). Maryland Youth Count 2017: A report on the findings from Youth REACH MD’s second survey of unaccompanied youth & young adults experiencing homelessness. Baltimore, MD: The Institute for Innovation & Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work.

create more emergency shelter options for youth, giving them the necessary resources to become self-sufficient and achieve their goals.

LGBTQ youth are at increased risks for homelessness compared to their peers. Many of these youth are forced out of their homes because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression in which their legal guardians feel they are breaking societal or personal norms. Many youths may leave environments where their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression has led to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. The need for self-consent to these shelters are essential for safety of these youth. SB207 will address this concern by creating more emergency shelter options for these youth. By providing clarity in the law to allow for self-consent by unaccompanied minors, service providers will legally be accountable for services provided. The requirement to register as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization ensures legitimate shelters that are known to state authorities. SB207 will also help prevent exploitation such as sex trafficking of unaccompanied homeless minors by increasing safe shelter options. In agreement with our goal towards improving the lives of LGBTQ Marylanders, unaccompanied homeless minors deserve the ability to obtain safety for themselves by accessing safe shelters.

**FreeState Justice strongly urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB207.**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important legislation, and please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Procopio  
Executive Director