

Senate Bill 207 Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

February 5, 2020

Position: SUPPORT

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 207.

SB 207 allows unaccompanied minors to consent to shelter and support services.

Unaccompanied homeless youth lack access to safe care and housing. According to the *Governor's Office for Children FY 2015 Children's Cabinet Strategic Direction and Implementation Plan*, an accurate number of unaccompanied homeless youth is undetermined because many are unserved and unidentified¹. The Maryland State Department of Education reported approximately 14,000 homeless youth during the 2011-2012 school year, which was a significant increase from 13,000 two years prior, with "virtually all reported as unaccompanied²." The needs of unaccompanied minors are unique and are not met when placed in adult shelters and supportive services. They are at risk of substance use, foster care, criminal involvement, incarceration, trauma, depression, suicide, poverty, and unemployment.

SB 207 would remove a barrier in the law that limits a homeless youth from accessing appropriate safe shelter and supports. The Task Force to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth issued a report in 2013 with recommendations on how to increase access to flexible, transitional, and permanent supportive housing³. The Task Force found that providing varied housing options to unaccompanied minors reduces their risk of mental health problems, addiction, criminality, and other high-risk behaviors.

SB 207 will provide youth with a stable housing option along with supportive services that cater to their specialized needs. For this reason, **MHAMD supports this bill and urges a favorable report.**

¹https://goc.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2013/11/CC_Strategic_Plan_FINAL.pdf

²https://goc.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2013/11/FINAL_HB823_Task_Force_Report.pdf

³ *Id.*