

Senate Bill 530: HOME ACT - SUPPORT
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
Testimony of Ciera Dunlap, ciera@yesdropincenter.org
Youth Empowered Society (YES) Drop-In Center
February 4, 2020

Dear Senator Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ciera Dunlap and I would like to discuss my experience as a former Housing Choice Voucher recipient and current case manager at the Youth Empowered Society (YES) Drop-In Center, where I assist others with their housing vouchers. Based on my personal and professional experience, I cannot overstate the importance of The HOME Act, SB 530. I strongly urge you to support this bill.

As a teenager, I spent years homeless. During this period of time I was in and out of foster care and spent nights either “couch surfing” or staying outside. I wasn’t able to hold down a job or do much to better my situation because I had to focus on survival, figuring out each day where I would sleep and how I would eat. My situation began to change when I went to YO! Baltimore and became involved in the Ready by 21 program. It was there that I applied for a housing voucher. After waiting a year and half I finally received a site-based voucher. Having stable housing allowed me to pursue employment and other goals. I got a job at YES Drop-In Center as a case manager for youth experiencing homelessness. To earn more money, I held down a second job as a parking lot attendant on nights and weekends.

Three years into my voucher, and after a few raises and promotions, the combined income of my two jobs exceeded the income limits for the voucher program. This led a difficult decision. I could quit one of my jobs and keep the voucher, or I could continue to build my income and move on from the voucher program. I had worked so hard and waited so long for the voucher that the thought of losing its security and being vulnerable to homelessness again was hard to work through. In the end, though, I left the voucher program and have been able to maintain my two jobs and private rental housing on my own. Looking back, it is clear that being able to use a housing voucher enabled me to access opportunities and better my life.

Beyond my personal voucher experience, I am proud that I am in a position to give back to other youth who have the same goals as me as a case manager at the YES Drop-In Center. I have assisted numerous individuals through the voucher process as a case manager at YES. In this capacity, I help youth with the voucher application process and then with the process of finding an apartment. Time and time again, I have seen my clients turned away from private apartments because the landlord doesn’t want to rent to someone with a voucher. In particular, I have seen individuals with disabilities struggle to find housing with a voucher.

Even with the new Baltimore City law which passed last year, youth are still being denied housing if they have a voucher or other housing subsidy. As you probably know, Baltimore City’s law – unlike all the other laws in the state – puts a cap on the number of voucher holders in a building.

These continual rejections not only cause extreme stress for my clients, they also put the voucher in jeopardy. This is a huge problem because vouchers are scarce. Only a fraction of eligible applicants actually ever get one and those that do have had to wait a long time. After receiving a voucher, an individual has only 60 days to find an apartment. My clients struggle to find a landlord in an area where they want to live to accept their voucher. The result is that my clients have to simultaneously fight for voucher extensions while looking for an apartment. I currently have one client who has been steadily trying without success for a year to find an apartment and will lose his voucher in the next month if he is unable to find a landlord who will rent to him. I have seen other clients move into inappropriate apartments in unsafe neighborhoods just to avoid losing the voucher.

Many people receive housing vouchers because they have a disability or have been homeless. The voucher helps them build stability and pursue opportunities, like I was able to. However, if landlords can refuse to accept vouchers, my clients are not protected from discrimination based on their disability or homelessness, or just based on being a voucher holder. Without the HOME Act the Housing Choice Voucher Program will not be able to serve its purpose and my clients will continue to be discriminated against.

Thank you for your time,

Ciera Dunlap
Case Manager
YES Drop-In Center