

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
HB 1166 – Public Safety – Law Enforcement Diversion Programs**

**House Judiciary Committee
March 6, 2020**



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 1166, which would authorize the establishment of a law enforcement diversion program in partnership with providers of behavioral health services and other community organizations.

This bill recognizes that “opioid use disorders, poverty, and homelessness in Maryland are persistent and growing concerns for Maryland communities, and that these concerns compound existing challenges to adequately address and manage behavioral health disorders” and that “[l]aw enforcement officers have a unique opportunity to facilitate connections to community-based behavioral health interventions that provide behavioral health services and can help save and restore lives, help reduce drug use, overdose incidence, and criminal offending and recidivism, and help prevent arrest and conviction records that destabilize health, families, and opportunities for community citizenship and self-sufficiency.” These are precisely the reasons we support this bill.

Health Care for the Homeless is a nonprofit, federally qualified health center that works 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. Among many other services, we operate State-certified Outpatient (OP) and Intensive Outpatient (IOP) treatment programs, medication assisted treatment (MAT), group and individual therapy, as well as psychiatric care. We draw on this first-hand experience, as well as recent research when asserting that creating a law enforcement diversion program would remove barriers to recovery for our clients.

According to a National Health Care for the Homeless Council study, persons experiencing homelessness have higher rates of substance abuse disorders (SUD), poorer health and higher mortality rates by opioid overdose than national averages.¹ Instead of criminalizing SUD, public health authorities, including the state of Maryland, are addressing the problem as a treatable disease. As such, we fully support a focus on criminal justice diversion policies for people suffering with SUD. People experiencing homelessness with untreated SUDs are at particularly high risk for incarceration. In these situations, local law enforcement officers are among a community’s best resources to divert individuals to treatment services.

We can build on the work the General Assembly has done to provide Marylanders treatment for SUD by connecting low-level, drug-involved offenders with treatment services. Aside from its effectiveness in helping curb the opioid epidemic, enhancing services for justice-involved individuals who have an SUD prevents re-entry and recidivism in the criminal justice system. We support empowering local law enforcement officials to use alternatives to arrest for individuals who commit low-level crimes associated with drug abuse and often co-occurring mental health issues. Similarly, we support providing the

¹ National Health Care for the Homeless Council, *Medication-Assisted Treatment: Buprenorphine in the HCH Community*, available at <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/policy-brief-buprenorphine-in-the-hch-community-final.pdf>.

opportunity for law enforcement officers to refer and connect people who use opioids to local, community-based drug treatment programs.

We would be willing partners in the law enforcement diversion program efforts contemplated by this bill and we respectfully urge a favorable report.

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.