

Testimony
SB874 – Community Health and Safety Works Grant Program and Fund – Establishment
BUDGET & TAXATION COMMITTEE
March 7, 2023
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chairman Guzzone and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee:

Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake brings people together to build homes, communities and hope. Our vision is a world in which everyone has a decent place to live. We have carried out this mission by actively building new homes and rehabilitating vacant housing stock for 40 years.

With the founding of Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity in 1982, the Habitat mission was introduced to Baltimore with staff and volunteers working to rehabilitate the iconic row homes in Baltimore City and County neighborhoods. In 1986, the Arundel Habitat for Humanity affiliate was established.

On July 1, 2009, the Arundel and Chesapeake affiliates merged to form Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake—a leading provider of affordable housing in the Anne Arundel County and Greater Baltimore region. In 2011, our reach expanded once again when we merged with Habitat for Humanity of Howard County. In 2014, Habitat Chesapeake joined forces with Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, building one united affiliate to better serve Central Maryland.

These mergers have allowed what is now Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake to serve even more communities and family partners in Maryland. By combining efforts, Habitat Chesapeake now has the capacity to renovate vacant and dilapidated inner city housing while also focusing on more rural single-family dwellings.

Today, we serve more families in Central Maryland than ever before. We have settled more than 789 families into energy-efficient, affordable homes with zero-interest mortgages.

Our homebuilding in communities is a part of helping bring one of the most crucial elements of physical development in a community: bringing in new homeownership into a community immediately adds to community strength and economic development. There are often other plans, goals, and needs that communities identify which would build greater strength and safety within their physical environment. These are plans that we support, but for which communities can often encounter obstacles in attempting to access.

Lighting plans in Baltimore City's Pigtown, on Ward Street, come to mind. Several years ago, there was a community-led effort to review public safety through design criteria in that neighborhood. The number one intervention they arrived at was that additional and adequate lighting would improve public safety, but also the look and feel of the neighborhood. It would lead to greater feelings of safety by the residents.

Greening plans for lots that formerly housed dangerously decrepit vacant houses in Woodbourne-McCabe is another example. For years, community leadership has identified greening efforts on lots that came into use after strategic demolition paved the path for that. As Habitat, we have aided in lot greening in that neighborhood, knowing how critical it is to the safety, and well-being of the neighborhood. However, our resources for engaging in projects other than homebuilding are limited.

The Community Health and Safety Works Grant Program and Fund could be an excellent resource for a community such as Woodbourne-McCabe, where residents are highly mobilized to see new and better investment in their neighborhood, and to help preserve the same.

SB 874 The Community Health and Safety Works Grant Program and Fund would provide a critical resource for communities seeking to address and improve the areas of need, and dreams they have for greater revitalization. In our own work, we have been the grateful recipient of funding toward security system upgrades for one of our ReStores. The support from this fund goes an incredibly long way for a non-profit like ours to strengthen our security systems.

We urge your support for this important new grant program and fund.

Respectfully submitted,

Leila Kohler-Frueh
Director of Community Engagement