

SB866 - Health - Small Halfway Houses and Small Private Group Homes - County Zoning
Senate Finance Committee

March 8, 2024

Position: OPPOSE

Dear Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

I'd like to start by giving a little bit of my background. I am a recovering addict in Westminster, Carroll County, Maryland. On May 2nd I will have 17 years of sobriety, and total complete abstinence of all substances, including alcohol. If it were not for recovery residences, sober homes, and/or group homes, I would not be the successful business woman, mother, friend, and daughter I am today. Not only did a recovery residence give me the ability to feel human again, it gave me stability... the stability I needed to gain employment, to get my daughter back and have a life worth living. I am also a former State employee of the Interagency Committee on School Construction (IAC) under Dr. David Lever for almost 11 years. I worked under Dr. Lever as his Executive Associate, and have an understanding of local jurisdiction authority, which is what raises my concern.

Senate Bill 866 would pose a significant threat to the very essence of what makes recovery possible for countless individuals like myself. Currently, these homes are protected by the Fair Housing Act, Maryland Civil Rights Laws, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Federal Fair Housing Act as amended in 1988, prohibits housing discrimination on the basis of "handicap", ("or Disability"). Due to the Rehabilitation Act, "disabled" now includes "individuals who have a record of drug use or addiction". Putting this bill into effect would become a potential form of segregation, by giving local governments the power to exclude housing for these individuals through the exercise of zoning authority, and dividing where recovering addicts are to live and the process in which they get to find a home. We are humans and we have the right to recover in a livable community just like anyone else.

The number of overdoses in 2019 in Carroll County was 1063. The number of overdoses in 2023 was 581. That is nearly half the amount in less than 4 years! During this timeframe there have been several recovery residences that have opened in Westminster specifically, and these homes have had a direct impact on saving lives! Recovery Residences, sober homes, and group homes are a huge form of **Harm Reduction**. Harm Reduction not only helps the suffering addict, but the communities and families at large. Where will addicts go if these homes don't exist or are so very few and far between? The homeless population will only increase, and lives will be lost, families continued to be torn apart, children continuing to lose their parents, and vice versa. These homes are where people can live safely, have a structured life, still feel a part of a community, and become a productive member of society. Restricting the operation of recovery residences could exacerbate housing shortages for vulnerable populations, making it increasingly difficult for those in recovery to find stable, supportive living environments. This is not just a matter of zoning; it's a matter of public health and community well-being.

I implore you to consider the lifeline that these facilities represent for those in recovery. The structured support, sense of community, and accessibility to resources they provide are irreplaceable. Any legislation that threatens the existence or efficacy of such places, risks undoing the progress many have fought hard to achieve.

I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 866. The lives of countless Marylanders, including my own, have been profoundly changed for the better by the support and sanctuary provided by recovery residences. Let's protect and preserve these vital resources for those who are yet to embark on their journey to recovery, as well as those who have already started this journey.

Thank you for considering my perspective and for your commitment to the well-being of our communities.

Sincerely,

Helen McCall
Westminster MD (Carroll County)