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**DATE:** January 21, 2025  
**BILL NO.:** Senate Bill 234  
**TITLE:** Homeless Shelter Certification Program  
**COMMITTEE:** Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

### Letter of Support

#### **Description of Bill:**

Senate Bill 234 establishes a homeless shelter certification program in the Department of Housing and Community Development. The bill requires shelter operators in Maryland to obtain a certification in order to operate, and to renew the certification every two years. The bill also requires the Department to develop regulatory standards for homeless shelters, including operational, staffing, and building standards, as well as minimum standards for the protection of rights of shelter residents. It also authorizes the Department to suspend or revoke a shelter operator's certification and impose administrative penalties of up to \$10,000 if the shelter is not in compliance with regulations one year after adoption.

#### **Background and Analysis:**

Over 32,000 Marylanders experienced homelessness in FY2023. Approximately 16% of individuals were unsheltered, 67% were in emergency shelters, and 17% were in transitional shelters. Emergency and transitional shelters serve Maryland's most vulnerable citizens, who are at the highest risk of contracting illnesses, have chronic health conditions and disabilities, and who rely on shelters to meet their most basic needs for nutrition, personal hygiene, and sleeping accommodations. Shelters also serve highly vulnerable populations with complex needs, such as people fleeing domestic violence, children, older adults, and chronically homeless individuals with disabilities. Due to this vulnerability and the nature of care being provided, it is critical that shelters operate with a minimum set of standards for habitability, quality of care, and staff and volunteers that are appropriately trained and equipped to meet the needs of shelter residents.

Only about one-third of the nearly 200 emergency and transitional shelters in operation across Maryland are funded by the State and have mandated standards and regular monitoring for compliance. The remaining shelters are funded by local government or private organizations, and subject to minimal local laws or regulations - or in some cases, none at all. DHCD frequently hears from individuals who have been denied entry into shelter based on their membership in a protected class, terminated from program services unfairly or in violation of federal laws, or experienced trauma and mistreatment while staying in shelters.

If the bill is enacted, DHCD intends to engage community partners to design the regulations and certification application process - including Continuums of Care, shelter service providers, local governments, and other state agencies. The Department will develop a tiered system of shelter certification, that reflects the wide variety of types of shelters. The Department also intends to provide training and technical assistance for service providers on the new regulations and how to come into compliance, in addition to providing an opportunity for corrective action prior to the implementation of any penalties for non-compliance.

#### **DHCD Position**

Senate Bill 234 ensures that shelters provide a consistent and high-quality level of care for people experiencing homelessness, and provides remedies when shelters violate those standards. The Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development respectfully requests a **favorable** report on SB 234.



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