



Empowering People to Lead Systemic Change

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DisabilityRightsMD.org

Disability Rights Maryland
SB 0484 – Unhoused Individuals - Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense
Hearing before the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, February 6, 2025
Position: Support

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the designated Protection and Advocacy agency for the State of Maryland, mandated by state and federal law to advocate for the civil rights of Marylanders with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities and live in safe, affordable and accessible housing.

DRM urges you to support Senate Bill 484, which recognizes the dignity and civil rights of unhoused individuals in Maryland.

SB 484 is a critical piece of legislation that is needed now more than ever. The United States Census Bureau reports that Maryland is home to roughly six million people.¹ On any given day, an estimated 6,000 Marylanders are experiencing homelessness.² The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regularly reports that individuals with disabilities are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness. According to the 2024 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, nearly 50% of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness have a disability. *Id.*

This legislation provides a unique opportunity for Maryland to take a step toward true public health and safety, and to bring Maryland in line with other jurisdictions that have taken a balanced and humane approach to addressing individuals experiencing homelessness.

This legislation is essential in ensuring public health and safety for unhoused individuals.

Without adequate protections in public spaces, unhoused individuals are often forced into dangerous and unsanitary conditions, which increases their risk of illness, worsens disability-related symptoms, and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. For example, one DRM client—a mother of two—experienced homelessness during the peak of this winter season. With nowhere else to turn, she and her children were forced to stay in an abandoned house without electricity or running water. She reported that her son, who lives with a disability, experienced increasingly severe symptoms due to their unsafe and unsanitary living conditions. This heartbreaking situation is not unique; it reflects the harsh realities faced by countless unhoused individuals and families across Maryland.

SB 484 addresses this problem by removing the need to seek out dangerous and unsanitary conditions. By affirming the right to engage in life-sustaining activities in public spaces, this legislation ensures that unhoused individuals are not forced into situations that jeopardize their health and well-being.

SB 484 decreases unnecessary contact between law enforcement and unhoused individuals.

DRM has consistently observed that its housing clients—who are predominantly Black and African American—bear the brunt of policies that criminalize homelessness. By protecting

¹ United States Census Bureau. (2023). Available online: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MD/PST045223>

² The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2024 Annual Homelessness

Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Available online: <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2024-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

activities such as sleeping, resting, and seeking shelter in public spaces, SB 484 reduces the role of law enforcement in managing homelessness. This shift is essential because punitive measures such as citations and arrest for minor infractions related to homelessness, do not address the root causes of homelessness. Instead, they exacerbate the challenges faced by unhoused individuals and trap them in cycles of poverty and criminalization. Reducing law enforcement contact with unhoused individuals also helps to mitigate the trauma and mistrust that often arise from these interactions.

SB 484 fosters a more effective approach by affirming unhoused individuals' right to exist in public spaces and ensures that unhoused individuals are not punished for their socioeconomic status when no adequate housing alternatives exist.

We urge Maryland to join a growing number of jurisdictions that have adopted a balanced and humane approach to addressing unhoused people. In 2012, Rhode Island became the first state to formally protect the rights of those experiencing homelessness in its "Homeless Bill of Rights." This landmark legislation ensures that unhoused individuals are not criminalized for engaging in life-sustaining activities. Since Rhode Island's pioneering effort, other states and cities have followed suit including Illinois, Connecticut, and California.

This bill would be a significant step in the right direction in changing the way Maryland and local jurisdictions treat people experiencing homelessness. **For the foregoing reasons, Disability Rights Maryland supports SB 0484.**

For more information, please contact:

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