



HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 484 – Unhoused Individuals – Rights, Civil Actions,
and Affirmative Defense
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 6, 2025



Health Care for the Homeless and its national affiliate, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, strongly support SB 484, which would ensure all unhoused individuals have the right to engage in life-sustaining activities in public spaces, allows the Attorney General or an individual harmed by a violation of the Act to bring civil actions against a government entity, and repeals local laws that prohibit vagrancy.

Homeless encampments occur because there is a pervasive lack of affordable, permanent housing in our communities. As the cost of housing continues to exceed income, the number and scale of encampments is only increasing. Community responses to remove, or “sweep,” encampments are understandable because people are rightly disturbed by the existence of homelessness, especially in the United States. Not only is homelessness a clear violation of human rights, but it is also a stark reminder of the systemic public policy failures across the housing, health care, labor, and education sectors that have produced [epidemic levels](#) of homelessness amid a critical shortage in rental housing [nationwide](#) and here in [Maryland](#).

Encampment sweeps (and other measures to forcibly remove individuals from public spaces) do not solve homelessness and instead, only create additional problems. As health care providers, we have seen first-hand how forced relocations without connections to housing result in further harm in four different ways:

- **Sweeps damage health, well-being, and connections to care:** they destroy items needed for survival, cause trauma and worsen mental health conditions, destroy life-saving medications and medical equipment, sever connections to care, and undermine trust in service providers.
- **Sweeps compromise personal safety and civic trust:** they increase arrests and assaults on residents, contribute to drug overdoses, push residents into more dangerous and isolated environments, cause widespread fear, increase hostile interactions with the police, disproportionately impact Black, Brown and other People of Color and those with disabilities, violate rights, and contribute to stigma.
- **Sweeps undermine paths to housing and financial stability:** they destroy vital records, prevent gainful employment, create criminal records, jeopardize housing opportunities, sever connections with the community, and damage hope.
- **Sweeps create unnecessary costs for local communities:** they cost millions of dollars, divert money from solutions such as housing, increase incarceration costs, and undermine population health goals.

“When there are sweeps, I stop being able to get in touch with clients. If I can reach them afterwards, they are noticeably triggered. I’ve personally seen the city throw away family photos and vital documents and uproot my clients’ lives. When people are housing unstable, they’ve often been kicked out, evicted, or made to move many times and so the sweeps are retraumatizing.”
~ Red Nesbitt, Behavioral Health Therapist, Health Care for the Homeless

SB 484 would stop the harm that sweeps cause and allow individuals and service providers to focus on more effective and constructive measures to increase stability and end homelessness, such as connecting people to permanent housing. For more details on the harms of encampment sweeps, as well as many resource documents, please see our fact sheet: [Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness](#).

We urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 484.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at centers in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council (NHCHC) is a membership organization representing HRSA-funded Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) health centers, medical respite programs, and other organizations providing health care to people experiencing homelessness. Our members offer a wide range of services to include comprehensive primary care, mental health and addiction treatment, medical respite care, supportive services in housing, case management, outreach, and health education, regardless of an individual's insurance status or ability to pay. Last year, 300 HCH programs served approximately 1 million patients in over 2,500 locations across the country.

Our Mission: The NHCHC mission is to build an equitable, high-quality health care system through training, research, and advocacy in the movement to end homelessness.

For more information, visit www.nhchc.org