



HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY

FAVORABLE

SB 514 – Landlord and Tenant - Residential Leases - Prospective Tenant Criminal History Records Check (Maryland Fair Chance Housing Act)

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

February 6, 2025

Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) strongly supports SB 514, Maryland Fair Chance Housing Act, which would limit a landlord’s review of an applicant’s criminal record. SB 514 is a vital measure to ensure that our returning Maryland residents are given an equitable opportunity to secure housing.

As part of our integrated services, HCH has a supportive housing team made of therapists, peer advocates and case managers provide crucial support services to help people find and keep housing. As a result of our supportive housing program, 400 people now have stable housing. There is no greater tool for health care than stable housing. Our clinicians, providers and staff directly see that housing is the solution to many problems. Once a client gets stably housed, they find gainful employment, reunite with their families, start relationships and learn to trust again.

Conversely, we see firsthand that criminal records can have detrimental effects on a person’s life, but can particularly present insurmountable barriers to housing. This bill is an effective tool in reducing barriers to housing, which is key to ending homelessness. HCH Chief Behavioral Health Officer, Lawanda Williams, MPH, LCSW-C, who oversees our supportive housing work, speaks to the critical nature of this bill:

SB 514 directly benefits individuals experiencing homelessness by removing systemic barriers that have long excluded people with criminal records from accessing housing. Many individuals experiencing homelessness face criminalization due to survival behaviors, and for the merely living their private lives in public. These records become lasting obstacles to navigate in the pursuit of stable housing, which is the very thing that can actually change the trajectory of one’s life. From my work at Health Care for the Homeless, I know that the success of any intervention I provide is magnified when rooted in housing. Clients are able to begin to address chronic health conditions, restore important family and community relationships, and explore other important goals when they have a safe and stable place to live.

By limiting landlords’ ability to inquire about criminal history prior to conditional housing offers, this bill ensures that prospective tenants are judged based on their ability to pay rent, rather than past transgressions. Transgressions are not hoarded by those experiencing homelessness or those who experience housing instability. Anyone can make a mistake. Maryland, like much of the United States, has a painful history of housing segregation. The discriminatory practices then, including redlining and restrictive covenants, were policy decisions—policy decisions that have impacts today. This legislation takes important strides

towards righting the past, creating pathways to housing and stability for those who need it most.

This legislation is not only compassionate but fiscally responsible. Research consistently shows that investing in housing reduces public costs associated with emergency healthcare, criminal justice involvement, and shelter systems. This bill represents a critical step in addressing homelessness with dignity, efficiency, and fairness. I urge you to support Senate Bill 514.

Every Marylander deserves safe and habitable housing. This bill is an important step to ensuring that this becomes a reality. We urge a favorable report on SB 514.

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 12,000 Marylanders annually at sites 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.