
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 484
Unhoused Individuals - Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense
Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 6, 2025

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports SB 484, which will establish basic rights for people experiencing homelessness and afford them legal recourse when those rights are violated. This legislation will address the overcriminalization of the unhoused and provide critical protections for this vulnerable population.

Criminalizing people experiencing homelessness does not solve the problem of homelessness and exhausts state funds in the process. Criminalizing homelessness creates barriers between unhoused people and employment opportunities, public benefits, and stable housing. The criminalization of homelessness serves to fuel already high carceral expenditures in the state of Maryland, which has increased the operating budget for pretrial detentions by a rate of 38.8% since FY 2025.¹ Evidence-based solutions to the problem of homelessness exist, such as Rapid Rehousing, which has resulted in permanent housing success rates of up to 84%.² Criminalization is expensive for the state and not an evidence-based solution to the issue of homelessness.

Last year, the United States Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that local governments can impose anti-homelessness laws without violating the 8th Amendment. *Grants Pass v. Johnson* overruling set a precedent for anti-squatting policies nationwide.³ Instead of following localities that are adopting inhumane anti-squatting laws, Maryland has the opportunity to provide sanctuary for our most vulnerable community members. Rhode Island, a neighboring state, was the first to establish a homeless bill of rights, which **protects unhoused individuals from moving freely in public spaces without being discriminated against as any other person would.**⁴ Additionally, it mirrors those provisions by prohibiting government agents from impeding unhoused individuals from life-sustaining activities, such as sheltering in public areas.

Rhode Island's progressive approach has proven to be both compassionate and effective, as the policy has led to more individuals being connected to services, which

¹ "FY 2026 Maryland State Budget Highlights." 2025. State of Maryland.

<https://dbm.maryland.gov/budget/Documents/operbudget/2026/proposed/FY2026MarylandStateBudgetHighlights.pdf>.

² Daniel Gubits, Korrin Bishop, Lauren Dunton, Michelle Wood, Tom Albanese, Brooke Spellman, and Jill Khadduri. 2018. "Understanding Rapid Re-Housing: Systematic Review of Rapid Re-Housing Outcomes Literature,".

³ ACLU Alaska. 2024. "U.S. Supreme Court overturns Grants Pass v. Johnson ruling." ACLU of Alaska.

<https://www.acluak.org/en/press-releases/us-supreme-court-overturns-grants-pass-v-johnson-ruling>.

⁴ Szyba, Randall T. 2012. "Assembly OKs legislation to create "Homeless Bill of Rights."" State of Rhode Island General Assembly News.https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/RIL.PressRelease.ListStructure/Forms/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31-3c10-431c-8dcd-9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=7966.



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will lead to better long-term well-being for unhoused individuals. Maryland stands to benefit greatly from adopting a similar strategy, not only by reducing strain on the criminal justice system but also by improving outcomes for the unhoused population. Ensuring access to services, like mental health care and substance use treatment, would help with breaking the cycle of homelessness, ultimately reducing long-term public costs associated with emergency services and incarceration.

By implementing similar protections, Maryland would align itself with states like Connecticut and Delaware, which have followed Rhode Island's lead in establishing safeguards for unhoused individuals. This shift would prioritize the allocation of resources towards rehabilitation, healthcare, and housing support rather than perpetuating expensive legal processes. Furthermore, **embracing this progressive approach would reinforce Maryland's commitment to social equity by addressing homelessness in a compassionate and sustainable way.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on SB 484.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.