



Maryland Chiefs of Police Association

Maryland Sheriffs' Association



MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable William C. Smith, Jr., Chair and
Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Darren Popkin, Executive Director, MCPA-MSA Joint Legislative Committee
Andrea Mansfield, Representative, MCPA-MSA Joint Legislative Committee
Samira Jackson, Representative, MCPA-MSA Joint Legislative Committee

DATE: February 5, 2025

RE: **SB 484 Unhoused Individuals – Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense**
POSITION: **OPPOSE**

The Maryland Chiefs of Police and the Maryland Sheriffs' Association (MCPA-MSA) **OPPOSE SB 484**. SB 484 establishes rights that unhoused individuals have in engaging in life-sustaining activities, while authorizing civil action to be taken against any government agents or entities that attempt to violate the rights as established within the bill.

MCPA-MSA firmly believe that the unhoused population of Maryland are valuable members of our communities and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Similarly, *all* Marylanders, whether housed or unhoused, are entitled to safe environments and to the use and enjoyment of all public places. MCPA-MSA understand that the government has an important role to play in providing necessary aid to the unhoused population. Law enforcement agencies across the State have robust partnerships with local organizations that provide shelter, sustenance, and assistance to the unhoused with a goal of service and support. There is much work being done, there is more to be done, and MCPA-MSA are honored to continue doing the work.

However, SB 484 mandates an approach that has proven to be a failure in other jurisdictions that have incorporated it across the country. This bill calls for the allowance of unhoused individuals to sleep or take shelter in an “unobtrusive”, a word undefined by the bill, manner on public land such as parks, courtyards, parking lots, sidewalks, public buildings, underpasses, shopping centers, etc. Furthermore, the bill provides that unhoused individuals are able to engage in life-sustaining activities provided that the activities do not “obstruct the normal movement of pedestrians or vehicles”, however this unclear language does not define “normal movement”. The broad language and lack of clarity within this bill raises extreme concern. In addition, this bill’s allotment for a state agency or a state agent to have a civil action brought against them for violating the rights within this bill, and its unclear language, is incredibly alarming to the MCPA-MSA.

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The grave consequences that will be created by the implementation of SB 484 were recently discussed at length by the United States Supreme Court in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). Similarly to SB 484, the Ninth Circuit had forbidden municipalities from enforcing certain criminal laws against unhoused individuals unless the municipality could demonstrate access to alternate shelter. In like manner, SB 484 and the Ninth Circuit ground their approaches on a misunderstanding of a constitutional prohibition against “cruel and unusual punishment.”¹ Enforcing quality of life, mitigating public nuisance, and upholding public safety laws as it pertains to unhoused individuals simply do not surpass the threshold necessary to constitute cruel and unusual punishment.

The Supreme Court concluded their opinion in *City of Grants Pass* with this observation: “Yes, people will disagree over which policy responses are best; they may experiment with one set of approaches only to find later another set works better; they may find certain responses more appropriate for some communities than others. But in our democracy, that is their right.” 603 U.S. at 561. Our position is that the experiment of SB 484 should not be supported in Maryland and will undoubtedly have unintended consequences that will negatively impact generations of Marylanders to come. For these reasons, MCPA-MSA strongly **OPPOSE SB 484** and urge an **UNFAVORABLE** committee report.

¹ SB 484 specifically refers to Article 25 of Maryland’s Declaration of Rights which provides, “That excessive bail ought not to be required; nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel or unusual punishment inflicted, by the Courts of Law.” “Article 25 is, textually and historically, substantially identical to the Eighth Amendment. Indeed, both of them were taken virtually verbatim from the English Bill of Rights of 1689. Thus, it is well settled in this State that Article 25 is in *pari materia* with the Eighth Amendment.” *Aravanis v. Somerset County*, 339 Md. 644, 656 (1995).