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TOWN ADMINISTRATOR
Edward Hopkins

February 10, 2025

The Honorable Luke Clippinger
Judiciary Committee
101 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: House Bill 487 - Unhoused Individuals – Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense - UNF

Dear Chair Clippinger:

I am writing in opposition to House Bill 487. While the goal of eliminating homelessness is admirable, it should not come at the expense of the safety and well-being of our other residents.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently held that the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment does not prevent cities from penalizing the homeless for sleeping in public, even if they have no other place to go. See, City of Grant's Pass v. Johnson, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). This bill is a response to that ruling, and I urge you to carefully review the significant concerns raised in that case regarding the potential consequences of this legislation.

The country has seen the results of similar policies in places like San Francisco, where large homeless encampments in public spaces have become common place. Children and adults alike must pick their way around human waste, used needles, and trash on their way to work and school, presenting health and safety hazards to the entire community.

House Bill 487 will have the unintended consequence of increasing homelessness by removing a crucial tool that helps encourage homeless individuals to accept shelter and other services. Many homeless individuals are not actively seeking shelter and, in fact, often refuse available services. Vagrancy and similar laws are not intended to incarcerate the homeless, but rather to compel them to seek shelter or engage in services that can address the root causes of their situation.

Most shelters require adherence to certain rules, including curfews, prohibitions on alcohol and drug use, and sometimes attendance at religious services. These restrictions often deter

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those who may prioritize their personal freedom over shelter, and as a result, they may prefer to remain in public spaces rather than accept the shelter being offered. This bill will allow the homeless to use public spaces, including government buildings, rather than shelters that are properly equipped with bathrooms, beds, and other facilities needed to properly house the homeless.

Homelessness is a complex issue, often rooted in substance abuse and mental health disorders. Allowing individuals to occupy public spaces does not effectively address the problem.

I strongly urge the Committee to issue an unfavorable report on House Bill 487. This bill does not provide an effective or sustainable solution to the issue of homelessness, and it will worsen the challenges faced by both the homeless population and the broader community.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paula S. Etting". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Paula S. Etting
Chair, Board of Commissioners
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cc via e-mail only:

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Harford County Council President Patrick S. Vincenti
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