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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 487**  
**Unhoused Individuals - Rights, Civil Action, and Affirmative Defense**  
*Judiciary Committee*  
**February 12, 2025**

**Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports HB 487**, 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 – it only exacerbates it while exhausting state funds in the process.** Criminalization creates barriers to employment opportunities, public benefits, and stable housing, making it harder for individuals to exit homelessness. In Maryland, carceral expenditures continue to rise, with the operating budget for pretrial detentions increasing by 38.8% since FY 2025.<sup>1</sup> 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%.<sup>2</sup> This highlights that investment in supportive services is far more effective than relying on punitive measures.

Last year, the United States Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* that local governments can impose anti-homelessness laws without violating the Eighth Amendment. This decision set a precedent for anti-squatting policies nationwide.<sup>3</sup> Rather than following localities that are adopting inhumane anti-squatting laws, Maryland has the opportunity to provide sanctuary for our most vulnerable community members by prioritizing solutions over punishment. Rhode Island, a neighboring state, was the first to establish a Homeless Bill of Rights, which **protects unhoused individuals' right to move freely in public spaces without discrimination**.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this law also prohibits 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

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<sup>1</sup> "FY 2026 Maryland State Budget Highlights." 2025. State of Maryland.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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,".

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> 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](https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/RIL.PressRelease.ListStructure/Forms/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31-3c10-431c-8dcd-9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=7966).

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.

Homelessness is a statewide crisis that requires a coordinated response. Leaving the decision to individual counties will continue to result in inconsistent and often punitive approaches. In contrast, a comprehensive and humane statewide strategy would provide a baseline of protections while allowing for localized implementation to best suit individual county needs. 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 investment in rehabilitation, healthcare, and housing support rather than perpetuating costly and ineffective legal processes. Furthermore, **embracing this proactive approach would reinforce Maryland's commitment to social equity and long-term solutions by addressing homelessness in a compassionate and sustainable way.**

**Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on HB 487.**

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*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.*