

February 10, 2025

Maryland General Assembly

**House Bill 0487**

Unhoused Individuals - Rights, Civil Action, Affirmative Defense

Members of Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to voice my concern on behalf of my community members of SE Baltimore, regarding the HB0487. Here in SE Baltimore, we routinely interact and live among folks who are unhoused. A high percentage of these people are experiencing chronic mental health issues in tandem with drug addiction (often opioid use disorder). Many of these people come to SE Baltimore from elsewhere in the state of Maryland, or other states.

What we often see are unhoused people who camp in public spaces such as our city parks or pocket parks or small green spaces. Unfortunately, oftentimes, these people are not provided all the healthcare services and nutrition, sanitation and hygiene services that they need. So, they survive in tents, buy their drugs nearby (at times funded by package theft and larceny from auto/burglary here), and live at “rock bottom” daily. The homeless encampments are often dangerous for those occupants, overdoses are common, and sanitation is a huge issue for them as well as surrounding neighbors. Uncapped syringes and human excrement are often a health and safety risk, as well as litter. So it becomes a health and safety issue beyond simply being “unsightly” to passersby and residents.

BCFD EMS often needs to make numerous medic runs when these people experiencing homelessness overdose or have other medical issues. These efforts are extraordinarily costly both in terms of time and money, for our first responders and the staff of our area hospital emergency departments.

What we also see is the Mayor’s Office of Homeless Services often engaging with these people. In the many cases where they’re able to engage and intervene, these folks are placed in homeless shelters and provided healthcare, food, clothing and a safe place to stay. The homeless campsite is cleared and the public space returns to a space that can be safely and comfortably used by everyone.

We are sympathetic to the idea of decriminalizing homelessness. In fact, the Mayor’s office here has instituted a very “soft touch” approach. I’ve asked numerous patrol officers with BPD if they’ve fined or arrested anyone for vagrancy. They always reply “No, we don’t do that. We offer services in collaboration with MOHS.” Yet, there are times where an encampment must be removed and that requires police enforcement, which requires enforcement of the law that prohibits vagrancy.

Baltimore continues to face a HUGE opioid epidemic and death toll from drug overdose. One major reason overdose deaths spiked during the coronavirus pandemic is that police here (and many other areas) stopped arresting people for minor crimes and outstanding warrants that are

symptoms of their addictions. Left on the street (as this bill would allow), many people will use until they die. This has been a long, unplanned experiment into what happens when the most devastating street drugs we've known are decriminalized, and those addicted to them are permitted to stay on the streets to use them.

Removing this lever to help get men and women off the streets and into a shelter to receive treatment is the opposite of compassion especially when the drugs many are using are as cheap, available and deadly as they are today. It used to be, we let people hit rock bottom before we intervened. Today, the drugs are different. Rock bottom is death.

We need to continue to fund and offer programs that address homelessness. Agencies such as the Mayor's Office of Homelessness are doing great work in collaboration with other agencies including the Baltimore Police Department. To allow unhoused people to indefinitely reside in public spaces in Baltimore City does them a serious disservice as well as the surrounding community, businesses and visitors. We need to continue to address this complex matter with empathy and in some instances, allow our police department to remove folks from public spaces when that presents a safety and health hazard to everyone involved.

I think unless you actually live in an urban environment such as SE Baltimore, you may not understand how this affects those living daily in the situation, whether they are unhoused or if they are housed and live here or own a business here. In my many conversations with fellow residents, first responders, business owners and healthcare providers, we would like to see continued focus on providing temporary shelter, long term housing, healthcare (including mental healthcare), addiction medicine services and food for these people who are experiencing homelessness. We would also like the Baltimore Police Department to be able to enforce laws when and if the time occasion arises which includes removing illegal encampments from public spaces while collaborating with other agencies to ensure those unhoused people get the help they need.

Sincerely,

Arch C. McKown  
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