

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill HB0448

Health Facilities – Certified Recovery Residences – Unannounced Inspections

Submitted by: Anita Puckett

Position: Support

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

In the early evening of July 25, 2021, I had the last phone conversation I would ever have with my son, Kevin. Sometime after midnight, Kevin was poisoned by fentanyl while residing in a recovery residence in Elkton, Maryland (Oxford House Principle).

Kevin died in the early morning hours of July 26. However, his body remained in his bedroom for approximately 40 hours before anyone checked on his well-being. The time listed on his death certificate, and the moment our family was officially notified, was the evening of July 27, when he was finally discovered.

There is absolutely no credible explanation for how this could have happened. Kevin's phone alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. every morning for work, two mornings in a row. The house was full of residents. Yet no one checked on him. There was no effective supervision, no accountability, and no house manager present to ensure even the most basic level of safety.

The recovery residence was located directly across the street from a courthouse. Because of this, Kevin routinely parked his vehicle there overnight, as daytime parking in that area is time-restricted. During the two days that Kevin lay deceased in his room, his vehicle accumulated two full days of parking tickets. Despite this obvious and visible warning sign, no one associated with the recovery residence noticed, questioned, or acted.

As a mother, losing a child is a lifelong trauma. But the circumstances surrounding Kevin's death compounded that trauma. Because his body remained unattended in a room for nearly two days, I was unable to see my son one last time. His father was forced to endure the devastating experience of identifying his child after the start of decomposition, an added trauma no parent should ever experience.

Recovery residences house vulnerable adults, individuals who are often early in recovery, medically fragile, and emotionally unstable. Many do not have strong support, the ability to advocate for themselves, or the power to leave unsafe environments. When the State allows individuals or organizations to house vulnerable adults under the banner of "recovery," there is a moral and regulatory obligation to ensure those environments are safe, monitored, and accountable. Housing vulnerable adults without meaningful oversight is not recovery support, it is abandonment.

What happened to my son was not an isolated failure. It was the predictable result of a system that allows vulnerable adults to be housed with little supervision, minimal enforcement, and no reliable mechanism to detect neglect before it becomes fatal.

House Bill 448 is an important step toward correcting this failure.

I strongly support the requirement for unannounced inspections, as scheduled or predictable inspections do not reflect the daily reality inside many recovery residences. However, based on my experience and what I continue to see across the state, this bill must go further.

1. Increase the number of unannounced inspections

I respectfully request that House Bill 448 be amended to require at least four unannounced on-site **evening** inspections per year, rather than two. These homes operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and house highly vulnerable individuals. Two inspections annually are not sufficient to identify ongoing neglect, drug use, or unsafe conditions.

2. Increase staffing dedicated to inspections and enforcement

Oversight is only effective if the Department has enough qualified personnel to conduct inspections thoroughly and consistently. Additional inspectors must be employed to ensure inspections are timely, meaningful, and not delayed due to staffing shortages.

3. Establish a Resident Bill of Rights with anonymous reporting

Residents must be protected and empowered, not silenced. A Resident Bill of Rights should include a secure, anonymous method for reporting unsafe conditions, drug activity, neglect, or retaliation. Fear of eviction or punishment keeps many residents silent.

House Bill 448 is not punitive, it is preventative. With these amendments, it would provide real oversight for housing vulnerable adults, not just paperwork compliance.

No family should have to endure what mine has endured. I respectfully urge this committee to pass House Bill 448 with these amendments and take this first step of many that is needed to protect vulnerable adults in recovery housing across Maryland.

Thank you for your time and consideration.