



HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
FAVORABLE

HB 637 – Public Health - Recommendations for Immunizations, Screenings, and Preventive Services - Pharmacist Administration and Required Health Insurance Coverage (The Vax Act)

House Health Committee
February 26, 2026

Health Care for the Homeless strongly supports HB 637, The Vaccine Access Expansion Act of 2026 (“The Vax Act”), which would, among other things:

- Establish a new authority for the Secretary of Health to issue official recommendations for immunizations, screening and preventive services for the state, based on sound science and clinical guidance;
- Decouple the State’s vaccine authority from the federal government bodies that have recently departed from the scientific consensus; and
- Require Maryland health insurers to provide coverage at zero cost share for immunizations, screenings, and preventive services that are recommended by the Secretary of Health.

As a Federally Qualified Health Center serving over 11,000 of Maryland’s most vulnerable individuals each year, we see firsthand the importance of vaccinations and evidence-based guidance for providers to keep our patients safe. We know that vaccines remain one of the most powerful public health tools available to protect against severe illness. Everyone deserves to have access to recommended vaccines and clear medical guidance.

Health Care for the Homeless Chief Medical Officer, Laura Garcia, CRNP, details how our patients need vaccinations to keep them safe and how evidence-based, professional medical guidance is essential for our medical clinic to provide the best client care, as this bill would provide:

My name is Laura Garcia, and I am a primary care provider and the Chief Medical Officer at Health Care for the Homeless in Baltimore. Thank you for the opportunity to offer my strong support for HB 637, the Vaccine Expansion Act of 2026.

I have worked at Health Care for the Homeless for over a decade, during which time I have provided care to individuals and families experiencing housing instability. Throughout my tenure, I have seen firsthand how essential preventive vaccinations and screening tests are to protecting the health of our most vulnerable patients. These interventions are among the most effective tools we have to prevent serious illness and reduce avoidable suffering. Many of the families we serve are in crisis. Children often lack access to consistent, nutritious food, increasing their vulnerability to illness and its complications. Parents frequently have no reliable support systems to care for their children should illness occur, and access to consistent, reliable health insurance coverage is often uncertain. In this context, limiting

access to safe and effective disease prevention tools such as vaccines and screening tests would be devastating. For these families, a vaccine-preventable disease or a screening-preventable cancer can have catastrophic consequences.

Fortunately, over the course of my career, I have encountered very few cases of vaccine-preventable diseases, a testament to Maryland's robust vaccination requirements for school attendance. These policies have played a critical role in safeguarding our most vulnerable patients, particularly those who, due to social or economic barriers, have at times struggled to remain up to date with recommended vaccination schedules. I am deeply concerned about the consequences for my patients should we begin to lose herd immunity to once-common childhood illnesses—a scenario that is already unfolding in other states with calamitous results.

By contrast, I have personally cared for patients with cancers that are preventable through timely screening. These experiences continue to motivate both me as a clinician and my organization to pursue stronger, more accessible preventive care systems that ensure all patients can benefit from early detection and intervention.

Permitting Maryland's senior health officials to determine how best to protect Marylanders through evidence-based, professional medical guidance is a welcomed and necessary step for our medical clinic and will support our continued ability to deliver the highest quality care to our patients. Preserving requirements that Maryland insurers provide coverage for sound, evidence-based preventive health interventions is essential to sustaining comprehensive vaccination and cancer screening programs and to safeguarding the health of the communities we serve.

Preventable illness is not only a tragedy for individual patients and families; it represents a failure of our health care system as a whole. HB 637 is a critical step toward ensuring equitable access to preventive care and safeguarding the health of communities that are already at disproportionate risk. I urge your support for this vital legislation.

For the health and safety of our patients as well as ensuring our ability to deliver the highest quality care, **Health Care for the Homeless strongly urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 637.**

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.