

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF
COUNCIL BILL 21-0004
OFFICE TO END HOMELESSNESS – ESTABLISHMENT, ADMINISTRATION,
AND PERMANENT HOUSING VOUCHER PROGRAM

HOUSING AND URBAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 23, 2021



Health Care for the Homeless is in support of CB 21-0004 for its establishment and administration of a Permanent Housing Voucher Program.

Each year in Maryland, using the narrowest federal definition of homelessness, more than 30,000 people experience homelessness—approximately 12,000 in Baltimore City alone.¹ Life on the street is brutal. The lack of secure and stable shelter, food, income, hygiene and physical and behavioral health care makes it nearly impossible to be healthy. The life expectancy of a person experiencing homelessness is just 48 years.

Housing must be considered a first-line response to the dramatic health disparities of homeless individuals. Moreover, the creation of affordable housing must be understood as a critical public health responsibility, for the control of communicable diseases and for efficient and effective health care planning and spending.

One of the primary factors that contributes to homelessness is a dire lack of affordable housing.² As such, we commend CB 21-0004 for creating an urgently needed program to increase the availability of permanent housing.

A Permanent Housing Voucher Program will also fill a necessary gap in housing for those that do not need (or no longer need) the additional supports provided by a permanent *supportive* housing (PSH) program, but where rent continues to be unaffordable. The desperately needed transition strategy provided by this bill will not only allow individuals and families obtain the affordable housing they need, but will also open crucial PSH to those who need the additional support.

[

For over 35 years, we have seen the devastating impact that homelessness and the pervasive lack of affordable housing has had on individuals, families and the community at large. Since 2005, we have partnered with the City on initiatives to house its most vulnerable residents and provide them with supportive services they need to stay housed. The need, however, has always greatly

¹ Maryland Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH), *2019 Annual Report on Homelessness*, available at <https://dhcd.maryland.gov/HomelessServices/Documents/2019AnnualReport.pdf>.

² ICH, *2018 Annual Report on Homelessness*, available at <https://dhcd.maryland.gov/HomelessServices/Documents/2018AnnualReport.pdf>.

Everyone deserves to go home.

exceeded available resources. A Permanent Housing Voucher Program will yield great benefits to the community:

- **Housing is health care.** Individuals experiencing homelessness have greater rates of acute and chronic illnesses and higher instances of mental health and substance use disorders than their housed counterparts. However, when these same individuals gain housing, they engage in treatment and recovery, improve their health, and increase their stability.
- **Housing is cost-effective.** Myriad studies nationally have shown that stable housing reduces the costs associated with frequent emergency department usage and inpatient hospitalizations, interactions with the criminal justice system, and contacts with police and emergency services personnel.
- **Housing is a human right.** No one benefits from homelessness, and we have a moral obligation to provide for those who are most vulnerable in our community. The additional housing units funded through the Trust Fund can help end homelessness and housing instability for over 4,000 households, and prevent eviction for 4,600 additional families.

In the absence of strong federal leadership and action to address the nation's housing crisis, we increasingly need our local communities to respond to these critical needs. The creation of a Permanent Housing Voucher Program will make a tangible contribution to preventing and ending homelessness in Baltimore City. We strongly urge the committee to issue a favorable report on CB 21-0004.

For the aforementioned reasons, we respectfully a favorable vote on this vital legislation.

Health Care for the Homeless works to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care, and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy and community engagement. We deliver comprehensive medical care, mental health and addiction treatment, case management, dental care and housing services to over 10,000 Maryland residents annually.