

Greetings honorable members of the Economic and Community Development Committee,

My name is Onyinye Alheri and I am writing on behalf of Charm City Care Connection (CCCC), an organization which serves people who use drugs in East Baltimore. We are in support of the establishment of an Office to End Homelessness and a Permanent Housing Voucher Program.

We know that lack of access to permanent, affordable housing has a negative impact on a person's mental and physical health¹. Many of our participants struggle to maintain stable housing, often sleeping in parks, under bridges or in abandoned buildings. This increases their chance of experiencing acute and potentially fatal emergencies including overdose, fires, carbon monoxide inhalation, severe frostbite, and violence of various types. Furthermore, their drug use precludes them from accessing many public shelters, whose policies explicitly prohibit people who use drugs from staying on the premises.

Homelessness is a reflection of various social and economic failures, and should not exist in the wealthiest nation on earth. Here in Baltimore, this crisis has been exacerbated by the reduction of public and affordable housing over the past few decades. The COVID-19 pandemic only made matters worse. Many of the people we serve found themselves homeless once again, or most severely than before. In response we created an emergency housing program, placing over forty individuals and families in hotels from March to October 2020. Unfortunately we ran out of funding to continue the program, and were unable to find city resources that met the level of care we provided. The creation of this office and voucher program can address that lack and prevent people from struggling and dying on the streets and in abandoned buildings.

We ask that in developing this much needed office and program, you are considerate to the particular needs of people who use drugs. Considering our city has the highest per capita prevalence of injection drug use in the nation², all public services provided by this proposed office **must** be inclusive of people who use drugs.

We are excited by this novel approach to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring in Baltimore. If done well, it has the potential to be a model which can influence housing policy in other cities. We are happy to engage with you all in the development of language to ensure that people who use drugs are not left out of this conversation.

Thank you,

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¹ Murria A. Homelessness: A Public Health Problem. 32(3):13-20. Accessed February 22, 2021.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=128346445&site=eds-live>

² Linton S, Celentano D, Kirk G, Mehtaa S. The longitudinal association between homelessness, injection drug use, and injection-related risk behavior among persons with a history of injection drug use in Baltimore, MD. National Center for Biotechnology Information. 132(3): 457-465. Accessed February 22, 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3926693/>