



February 22, 2021

Baltimore City Council Executive Secretary Natawna Austin
Via email natawna.austin@baltimorecity.gov
Re: TESTIMONY: CB#21-0004: OFFICE TO END HOMELESSNESS”

Dear Executive Secretary Austin and Council Members,

I write on behalf of the National Homelessness Law Center (“Law Center”) regarding CB 21-0004, which would create a permanent Office to End Homelessness and enable the creation of a local voucher program. This bill is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic to promote public-health based approaches to homelessness that focus on taking advantage of federal programs to safely house unsheltered homeless individuals. Baltimore can immediately end unsheltered homelessness by offering non-congregate shelter to people experiencing homelessness for the duration of the crisis, entirely on federal dollars, and then lay a foundation for carrying this into the future with its new Office and local voucher program. We urge you to leave a lasting legacy in your work to end homelessness by passing CB 21-0004 into law.

The Law Center is the nation’s only legal advocacy organization dedicated solely to ending and preventing homelessness. In 2017, we published *Tent City, USA: The Growth of America’s Homeless Encampments, and How Communities are Responding* (“Tent City Report”), collecting data on 187 cities’ policy responses to encampments, along with best practices, model policies, and case studies from across the country. The Tent City Report is available at https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Tent_City_USA_2017.pdf. Additionally, since 1991, the Law Center has documented the dramatic increase in laws nationwide that punish homeless people for performing harmless, life-sustaining activities in public places, as well as the negative consequences of those discriminatory measures. The Law Center’s 2019 Report addressing this issue, *Housing Not Handcuffs: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities* (“Housing Not Handcuffs Report”), is available at <https://www.nlchp.org/documents/Housing-Not-Handcuffs>. The Law Center’s reports demonstrate that laws like CB 21-0004 which actually address the underlying causes of homelessness, rather than wasting taxpayer resources on ineffective criminalization approaches, are part of a comprehensive solution to homelessness.

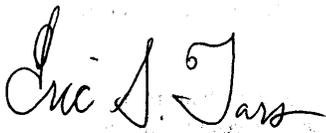
In an era of record poverty, prolonged unemployment, shrinking stock of affordable housing, all disparately impacting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other People of Color, and all made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, sensible, equitable, and cost-effective policies are needed. The City of Baltimore should continue its constructive work to *end* homelessness so that it need no longer pursue harmful sweeps of homeless encampments. By creating housing and services so that people do not have to undertake their basic life activities outdoors, it removes the need for costly and ineffective law enforcement approaches that merely shuffle the problem to different neighborhoods. By mandating the Office to End Homelessness promote policies that end the criminalization of homelessness, the city positions itself to take advantage of federal grant streams which prioritize anti-criminalization efforts, and lays the basis for effective policy decisions. Our federal and state governments have proven unreliable at best in stepping up with the resources needed to end homelessness, and it is time for Baltimore to take the lead on its own solutions.

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Additionally, we highlight the importance of these steps in the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidelines released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”) state “[i]f **individual housing** options are not available, allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are. Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.” See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>. This step is necessary to curb the spread of the virus and to protect against avoidable hospitalization and death among both housed and unhoused people. The good news is that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has recently approved waivers of both its 30 day renewal and 25% match requirements, offering 100% reimbursement funding for non-congregate (e.g. hotel or motel) shelter for the duration of the pandemic. See <https://nlihc.org/resource/fema-changes-policy-approve-non-congregate-shelter-reimbursement-duration-emergency>, <https://nlihc.org/resource/new-executive-order-addresses-urgent-health-and-housing-needs-people-experiencing>. **This means communities like Baltimore can end unsheltered homelessness tomorrow by offering non-congregate shelter to people experiencing homelessness for the duration of the crisis, entirely on federal dollars.**

We urge you to sign the CB 21-0004, quickly take advantage of federal resources to end homelessness, and continue to work with local advocates on constructive solutions. Please feel free to contact me at etars@nlchp.org or 202-638-2535 x. 120 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



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Legal Director

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