**Introduction**

Thank you Councilmembers. Thank you Councilmember Dorsey and those who contributed to the drafting of this bill. And most importantly, thank you to the people with lived experience of homelessness who provide critical expertise to inform our work.

My name is Hannah Roberts. I am a Baltimore City resident and former Chief of Staff for the Mayor’s Office of Homeless Services. I am here to share my perspective having worked in that office and explain why I believe that passing this bill is an imperative and its prescribed actions are achievable.

**Problem Statement**

Last year when this bill was first introduced, I reflected on the life and tragic death of Paul Behler, a passionate and committed advocate and colleague who spent much of his final years addressing systemic issues within our homeless service system. As he often did in his own advocacy, I spoke of the inhumane and terrifying conditions Paul and many others face sleeping outside or staying in a shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic. And in the few months since that conversation, more lives have been lost - the sad, but not altogether unexpected, reality of homelessness, a deeply traumatic experience that disproportionately impacts Black, trans, and queer residents and shortens the anticipated lifespan of those who experience it.

With thousands of people experiencing homelessness, hundreds of whom are chronically homeless, we must acknowledge that despite the valiant efforts of many, we are failing far too many members of our community, and in the process, depriving ourselves of their full contributions to our community. Fortunately, homelessness is not inevitable. There are proven solutions, and I am heartened to see some of them included in this bill.

**Support for the Bill**

Our community deserves an Office to End Homelessness with leadership that is held accountable for delivering on the mission embedded in its title. This bill will promote stronger accountability, which is critical, but accountability alone will be insufficient to address such deeply systemic issues. No office can realize this mission alone, and from my own experience within MOHS, I know that success will require much broader support and investment. When budget cuts are proposed, as they have been in the past, we need you to understand the implications of those cuts on already insufficiently funded services. When people complain about the conditions in shelters, we need you to know what it looks and feels like inside. It is my hope that this bill will facilitate not only greater accountability, but also a greater shared understanding of the problem and collective commitment to its solutions.

**Support of Local Housing Voucher Program**

I also support this bill because the proposed local housing voucher program, inclusive of a move-on strategy, is a creative and cost-effective solution based on national best practices[[1]](#footnote-1),[[2]](#footnote-2) and the recommendations of our community and its Action Plan[[3]](#footnote-3). Notably, the local housing voucher program will not only create new permanent housing, but it has the secondary benefit of maximizing the use of our limited permanent supportive housing inventory for those that most need it. This is an imperative in Baltimore City, where the need for both types of housing continues to grossly outpace their availability.

There are strong examples across the country of effective move-on strategies that provide low barrier, permanent housing using a variety of funding mechanisms and sources. A move-on strategy is, in fact, so widely accepted and recommended that the US Department of Housing and Urban Development has incentivized its use within the competitive scoring of CoC applications[[4]](#footnote-4), a process that provides our community’s largest source of federal funding. We need diverse and smart investments in both prevention and housing solutions to drive reductions in homelessness and this program would provide a proven and effective tool.

The challenge of ending homelessness is daunting, but it is not insurmountable. People’s lives depend on us. This bill is an important step forward and I encourage our City Council and community members to support its enactment.

Thank you for your time.

1. Corporation for Supportive Housing. Resources, tools, and examples available at <https://www.csh.org/moving-on/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Resources, tools, and examples available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/moving-on/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Baltimore City Continuum of Care Action Plan on Homelessness (2019). Available at <https://journeyhomebaltimore.org/resources/>. See recommendations on page 6 related to a local voucher program and page 7 related to a “move on” strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. US Department of Housing and Urban Development FY2019 Continuum of Care Notice of Funding Availability. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5842/fy-2019-coc-program-nofa/>. See page 63 for specific reference to move-on opportunities for individuals who are able and want to move out of supportive housing with a rental subsidy. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)