

Testimony on Bill 49-20, the Housing Justice Act

Submitted by

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Good Afternoon President Huck and members of the Council. My name is Susie Sinclair-Smith and I am the CEO of the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH), the largest nonprofit exclusively dedicated to ending homelessness in our community. I am here to enthusiastically applaud Lead Sponsors Councilmembers Glass and Katz, and Co-Sponsors Councilmembers Jawando, Rice, Navarro and Riemer for introducing the Housing Justice Act which is a principled and compassionate step that would significantly decrease the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in the County by reducing explicit discrimination against this population in the private rental housing market.

Each year, MCCH supports 1,600 vulnerable men, women, and children, including 170 families with over 300 children, in our work to help our clients return to stable housing as quickly as possible and to maintain stability in their new homes. While African Americans comprise 19% of County residents, 83% of our clients are persons of color with 65% identifying as Black and 18% as Latinx. Over 90 % of our families are Black. This is a stark picture of the impact of decades of racially discriminatory housing policies in our nation.

Many of our clients have histories of involvement with the justice system that led to their experience of homelessness and our case managers take every step possible to overcome this obstacle when we help them move into housing. We believe that landlords should evaluate housing applicants as individuals, rather than explicitly excluding people with criminal records and have found that a criminal record is not a good proxy for one's suitability as a tenant. In fact, there is no sociological research establishing a relationship between a criminal record and an unsuccessful tenancy.

Other client of ours have histories of involvement with the justice system that stem from being arresting, fined, or jailed for acts related to their survival while being homeless. This is not only cruel; it also funnels formerly incarcerated people back through the "revolving door" of homelessness and punishment, which reduces their chances of successful reentry at great cost to public safety.

A 2018 Center for Court Innovation study found 4 in 5 arraigned criminal cases were misdemeanors or lesser offenses and 40% were rearrested within six-months, the vast majority for future misdemeanor offenses. And almost a quarter of the population was homeless, either living on the street or unsheltered. 45% of Marylanders have a criminal record. It is clear that a proactive housing policy such as the Housing Justice Act is also a proactive crime prevention policy that would benefit our County.

In the last five years, Montgomery County has seen a 48% reduction in the number of people experiencing homelessness. Leading to this impact, MCCH partnered with the community on two successful Campaigns: Zero 2016 to end veteran homelessness; and Inside (Not Outside) in 2018 to end chronic homelessness. For both initiatives, the last individuals we were able to house faced significant housing barriers due to their histories of criminal justice involvement. In fact, the last veteran we housed during Zero 2016 had lived on the streets of Bethesda for 30 years with a long history of cycling in and out of jail for nuisance crimes such as urination in public. He now successfully holds a lease at Cordell Place, an apartment building in downtown Bethesda owned by MCCH's affiliate Coalition Homes.

This is evidence that our programs are working and our ending homelessness for everyone in Montgomery County is well within reach with full support our community and local businesses. The Housing Justice Act is an important step in fulfilling this goal and embracing our deep commitment to racial equity and social justice.