**The Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) Act:**

**Protecting Renters using Housing Vouchers**

By Arin Jayes

As a Support Services Case Manager at the Brain Injury Association of Maryland, several of the individuals I work with are recipients of federal housing vouchers, commonly referred to as Section 8. These housing vouchers have important implications for individuals living with brain injury because homelessness disproportionately affects this population. According to a recent study published by Lancet Public Health, a majority of people experiencing homelessness across the world have a history of concussions and other traumatic brain injuries. The authors also argued that these injuries could have contributed to or been caused by their homelessness.

The HOME Act is an important piece of legislation that was passed by The Baltimore County Council in November. This bill makes it illegal for landlords to discriminate against housing voucher holders. This legislation has been a top priority of Senator William Smith Jr., D-Montgomery, who is the new chairman of Maryland’s Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. The committee sponsored but withdrew the housing bill last session, when the committee was led by his predecessor, Sen. Bobby Zirkin, D-Baltimore County, who resigned from the Senate in December. The legislation was filed with the General Assembly in each of the past three years, but this year, it passed.

Proponents of The HOME Act assert that the bill will enable voucher-holders to live in more parts of the county. Currently, voucher holders are heavily concentrated on the east and west sides of the Baltimore County. 60% of Baltimore County’s 5,600 voucher users live in just seven ZIP codes on the county’s east and west sides. Baltimore County’s demographics further demonstrate the need for this bill: 32% are senior citizens, 25% are low wage workers, 30% are people with disabilities

Opponents of The Home Act include housing and real estate agent associations, who argue that voucher programs burden landlords with more rules and additional paperwork. However, the only requirement for landlords is that they pass a basic housing inspection in order to receive payment. Landlords will still be able to vet potential renters by reviewing criminal history, running credit checks and requesting rental history – factors that unfortunately bar many voucher holders from rentals.

Opponents are also concerned about the influx of low-income people living in their neighborhoods, a discriminatory outlook that proponents have vocally rejected. “Discrimination in any form is wrong," stated County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. He added that the bill was straightforward and mirrors others around the country. Cathy Bevins of Middle River called the HOME Act the most misunderstood bill that the council has ever had in front of them during her time on the council. “It’s not about forcing a Section 8 mandate in people’s neighborhoods,” Bevins said.

To learn more about this important piece of legislation, visit [The Citizens Planning and Housing Association](http://www.cphabaltimore.org/homeact/), which answers FAQs and addresses common misconceptions about the program.

A statewide HOME Act is now making its way through both the Maryland Legislature as [HB231 in the House](http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Legislation/Details/hb0231) and [SB530 in the Senate.](http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2020RS/bills/sb/sb0530t.pdf)

The Senate Bill (SB530) has made it through the Committee process and is scheduled to have its THIRD reading on the Senate Floor on Friday, February 21st. Please contact your Senator today to let them know you support this bill and what it will do to allow individuals with brain injuries to use their housing vouchers to live wherever in Maryland they want.

While the bill on the House side is not as far along, be sure to contact your Delegates as well to voice your support of this important civil rights bill.

Don’t Know Your Legislators? No Problem. [CLICK HERE](https://maryland.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=177afa87a67746a4ac5496b2d0897fb7), type in your address, and you will receive the contact information for all of your elected representatives.

**REFERENCES**

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