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**Testimony before House Judiciary Committee
In Support**

House Bill HB 911: Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter - Consent to Shelter and Supportive Services

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill HB 911: Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter - Consent to Shelter and Supportive Services. Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) supports this bill. HB 911 allows for unaccompanied minors who are experiencing homelessness to consent to receiving emergency shelter and related supportive services.

During the 2016-17 school year, Maryland public schools identified 2,337 unaccompanied homeless students, who lacked stable housing and were not in physical custody of a parent or guardian. Unaccompanied homeless minors are often unable to access safe shelter, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, dangerous living situations, and school drop-out. Minors are not legally competent to contract for rental housing or a hotel room. The child welfare system is unable to provide housing and services for unaccompanied homeless minors who it determines do not meet the eligibility criteria for foster care services. The only private emergency shelters specifically serving unaccompanied homeless minors in Maryland are federally-funded "basic centers." These programs are a critical and effective resource, but exist only in three Maryland counties and have very limited bed space.

Many Maryland non-profit organizations choose not to shelter unaccompanied homeless minors because it is unclear under Maryland law whether and how they can do so lawfully. HB 911 establishes that an unaccompanied minor in need of shelter has the same capacity as an adult to consent to shelter and supportive services, thereby incentivizing non-profit organizations to shelter this extremely vulnerable and underserved population

Emergency shelters for unaccompanied homeless provide an immediately accessible, youth-friendly space and can engage youth who may be in an unsafe situation and facilitate their connection to the child welfare system when appropriate. This is an important way to identify youth who may need child welfare support but might not otherwise come to the attention of the system. HB 911 requires that shelter providers contact the Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) to report suspected abuse or neglect. If the LDSS ultimately determines that the minor does not meet eligibility criteria for child welfare services, the private provider can continue to provide safe accommodations and services when the public system cannot.

Unaccompanied youth deserve shelter and supportive services to prevent homelessness. Lack of access to shelter is a primary risk factor for commercial sexual exploitation of children. HB 911 will prevent human trafficking and other exploitation of unaccompanied homeless minors by leading to the creation of more safe shelter options for them. For the reasons stated above, we urge this committee to issue a favorable report on HB 911.



