

HOMeward

Three federal policy priorities to get behind

Many of our public policies create and prolong homelessness. Regardless of the political party in office, each of us has the power and responsibility to make our values known.

In response to the changing political environment in 2025, our federal advocacy partners at the National Health Care for the Homeless Council encourage these three focus areas to rally behind:

- Preserve Medicaid:** Medicaid provides comprehensive health insurance to 55% of patients receiving care at Health Care for the Homeless programs (48% in Baltimore). Medicaid lowers overall system costs, improves health, and increases quality of life. *Examples: Oppose Medicaid block grants and government inefficiencies like Medicaid work requirements*
- Defend access to Substance Use Treatment:** Providing comprehensive, coordinated treatment for behavioral health conditions (including mental health and opioid use disorder) is essential to addressing homelessness. *Examples: Promote overdose prevention sites, expand access to medication, support Housing First policies*
- Protect the health and rights of people without homes:** Encampment sweeps, fines or arrests do nothing to end homelessness. A decent society provides access to basic human needs – including health care services – without stigma, harassment or threats against patients or providers. *Examples: Oppose “tent cities” and promote street outreach/medicine*



Call your policymakers


Tell your Congressional delegates to stand up for Medicaid, substance use treatment and care for people experiencing homelessness.



Follow our legislative priorities in Maryland

Advocate for budget items and policies that increase access to health care, housing and racial justice.

hchmd.org/2025-legislative-session

 Read the full one-pager at nhhc.org.

Day in the life: SOAR

Follow a “Day in the life” of SOAR, one of our littlest known programs that makes a big impact for people experiencing homelessness with mental health disabilities. SOAR Coordinator **Mina Davis-Harrison** and Disability Outreach Assistant Specialists **Dave Ramsey** and **Natasha Legette** facilitate the national “SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery” program for all of Baltimore City.



9:00 AM Mina arrives at 421 Fallsway and starts printing a stack of referral sheets. Today she and Dave will visit residents at a local shelter to see if they need assistance in qualifying for federal disability benefits.

10:10 AM One man is immediately interested. He has trouble with his mobility, and he tells Mina and Dave that he last applied for SSDI in 2022. After a denial, you have 60 days to appeal before your case expires.

“To qualify for SOAR,” explains Mina, “you have to be homeless or at risk of homelessness, not earning gainful income, and diagnosed with a mental health disorder.”

“That’s okay though,” Dave says, “we can help you start a new application.”

He’s also interested in reapplying for temporary disability assistance from the state. Mina sends him outside to John’s team, who registers him as a new client and arranges bus tokens to help him get to our Fallsway clinic.

9:30 AM Mina and Dave drive to the Westside Emergency Men’s Shelter, deep in the campus of Spring Grove Hospital Center, surrounded by green hills, hundred-year-old buildings and barbed wire fencing.



Outside the facility we see the bright familiar colors of the Health Care for the Homeless Mobile Clinic, where Outreach Services Manager John Lane works his way through a sign-up sheet of residents seeking medical services.

10:15 AM Mina and Dave circle the canteen as men trickle in and out. They have an established rhythm to the way they explain the program.

“I’ve applied ten times since I was 18, I’m 36 now,” explains one man. “This stuff is messed up.”

“The process, it sucks,” says Dave. “But what we can do is build a case for you.”

“Sometimes I just, I can’t...I get too mad, or manic or whatever, and I can’t keep a job like that.”

“See, that’s the stuff we include in your application,” says Dave.

10:00 AM John brings Mina and Dave into the shelter and introduces them to front desk staff. They’re led to the canteen, where half a dozen men sit, talking quietly or watching *The Price is Right*.



“Good morning, everybody,” Mina says. She has gift cards for potential clients. “Our team helps people apply for disability benefits—if you’re interested, if you’ve applied and been denied before, please come and talk to us.”

“All you have to do is show up,” adds Mina. “We might send you out for evaluations, but once we have all your information, we get all the paperwork together for you.”

10:30 AM Another man sits at the lunch table and tells Mina he was recently released from prison. “Last time I applied for SSI, they told me they couldn’t use records from DOC [Department of Corrections] even though I was getting psych treatment in there.”

“Well, that’s just not true,” says Mina. “You were receiving medication? Then you have documented history of mental illness.”

Many people experiencing homelessness with mental illness have already tried to apply for SSI/SSDI benefits. But the process to prove eligibility is long and complicated.

“I’m getting therapy here at the shelter,” he says, “but I’m not sure it’s with a licensed psych. I’ve gotten a bunch of diagnoses over the years; bipolar, PTSD, antisocial, whatever. I think I need to be reevaluated. And I wanna focus on getting clean.”


“That’s the good thing about HCH,” Mina says as they exchange contact info. “It’s really a one-stop shop; you can see a therapist, primary care, dental, start substance treatment. And even if there’s a problem with your records, we can have you evaluated by one of our doctors.”

11:15 AM Mina makes final rounds through the shelter and fills out as many referral sheets as she can. She and Dave check back in with John before leaving.

“A lot of the outreach we do is on foot like this,” says Dave. “But it’s hard to know who is going to continue their case.”

Mina says, “Even if I never see them again, once we get all their info, I can make sure their application is out the door.”

11:45 AM On their way back into the city, the team stops at the Baltimore Social Security Office. “I submit all our applications at least three ways,” says Mina. “Fax, email, and I drop them off in person. And still they get lost in the system.” The file she’s holding is one she’s submitted four times.



12:30 PM Back at Fallsway, Mina and Dave break for lunch. They say hello to Natasha, who splits her time between the clinic and Spring Grove Hospital.

All of the clients she sees are residents at the psychiatric hospital, often on a court-ordered stay.

“What I’m working on right now is a Medical Summary Report,” Natasha explains. “This client is a white female; she’s been at Spring Grove for over a year.” Natasha details a long history of emotional abuse, neglect, and substance use in her summary. “She has four children who are living with a family member.”

“I’ve been here a year, and I’ve had six clients awarded their benefits,” she says proudly. “People just tell me their whole life story. That’s what I like best about the job—talking to clients, getting to know them, making them comfortable with me.”

2:00 PM In the meantime, Mina has a message waiting for her—an internal referral. She calls to get more information and determines that the client is not eligible.

3:00 PM Mina starts planning the next outreach visit to the Patuxent Institution, a Correctional Mental Health Center in Jessup. For inmates with severe mental illness, access to disability benefits could prevent them from becoming homeless upon release—something that’s 10x more likely for formerly incarcerated people.

4:00 PM The team works on the day-to-day administration of the SOAR program: checking the status of applications, sending medical records, updating tracking sheets.

“It’s a bit of a ‘hurry up and wait’ game, unfortunately,” says Mina. It can take months to hear back about an application. But the SOAR team is persistent.

“A lot of cases fall through the cracks when the applicant is experiencing homelessness,” Mina says. “The key word for what we do is *advocate*.”

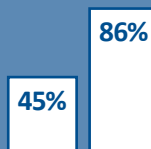
SOAR by the numbers



68,000+ people have used SOAR to access Social Security disability benefits since 2006

In Maryland, **45%** of initial SSI/SSDI applications are approved

vs **86%** approved using SOAR



\$967 = maximum monthly SSI payment

To be eligible for SOAR, clients must:

- ✓ Have a mental illness that makes it impossible to work, including substance use disorder or any cognitive disabilities
- ✓ Be unable to work or make less than \$1,550/month
- ✓ See a psychiatrist
- ✓ Have medical records detailing their disability

Sources: SAMHSA.gov; Atticus Law

PASS *the* MIC

with **DEBORAH HART**

Deborah is a US Army veteran, Bingo lover and lifelong volunteer. Pass the Mic features the voices and stories of people with a lived experience of homelessness.



My mother was always teaching us how to be resourceful, to be courteous. I've been volunteering since I was seven years old, when my mother had me passing out cookies at church. If we didn't have money for this or that, we made gifts out of paper. We got our orange and our peppermint for Christmas, and we were happy as can be. I joined the Army as a WAC (Women's Army Corps) in 1974 because I wanted to be a nurse like my mother was.

I had about 23 different jobs in the Army. My favorite was nursing, but I was also a recruiter, a Military Police investigator, a drill sergeant, then a first sergeant; I even went to Officer Candidate School for a time. I've always liked moving around. Sometimes I'll get bored and I'm ready to go to the next chapter. It's like an adventure for me; it's what makes me happy.

I was stationed in Saudi Arabia and Iran in 1990 and '91. I was the only woman on my unit, but I liked the men I worked with. At some point every night in the barracks, they'd tell me to go to bed because it was time for 'men to be men.' They all seemed to think they were my father!

I loved collecting things from my travels: perfume bottles, antiques, little collectibles. I would put them in a duffel and have it sent home by air mail.

But I had a hard time stationed overseas. Eventually I retired from the service, and when I came home, I was still moving around. I'm a Washingtonian, originally from southeast DC. I was a chauffeur in Delaware for a while, driving around celebrities and all kinds of people. I lived here first in the 1980s, and I came back to Baltimore in 2019 when I was homeless.

I was first connected with Health Care for the Homeless when I needed dental work done. The VA doesn't provide dental care unless you're on full disability. The clinic here took care of me, though, and now I show up when they need volunteers—the Coat Drive, the race at Patterson Park. I wrote a poem to read at the Homeless Persons' Memorial Day service.

When you're helping people and you see them walk out the door with a smile, you know your mission was accomplished.

I've sat on some committees, too; I think I bring a different perspective about what people need. I've been using a wheelchair for about 15 years now, and the VA finally got me a mobility scooter. But it's still difficult to get around the city.

The sidewalks between Our Daily Bread and the Fallsway clinic are all buckled by tree roots, so I have to ride my chair in the street. Handicap curbs are damaged all over the city. Earlier this year, my apartment complex where I have a voucher caught fire at three in the morning. But the building manager lost the elevator key—so the firemen had to carry me back up two floors!

People like me have different needs for housing; my living space is my world. If my world is cramped up, I'm cramped up. I'm hoping to move somewhere soon with more space.

All my family has passed away now—my mother and my siblings. I spend most of my time by myself, but that's alright. I go to Bingo, I go antiquing. I don't have a television or anything. I like to stay up all night and sleep during the daytime.

I am ambitious. I'm a happy person.

If I could give anyone some advice, I'd tell them to enjoy themselves. Read your favorite book, make your favorite dish; go to the family reunion and keep your family close if you can. You won't know what happened before you unless the elders tell their stories. And older people have the best stories because they've lived it!

Youth drop-in center has a new home!

*Youth Empowered Society (YES) is Baltimore City's only drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness. We chatted with Program Director **Ciera Dunlap** about the need for youth services, the new location and the year ahead.*

YES Drop-In Center first opened in 2012. Have you seen changes in youth homelessness since then?

One of the biggest changes we have begun to see is an increase in parenting and pregnant youth, making it an intergenerational issue. During the pandemic, many young people lost employment and other sources of income, making it harder to access housing, health care, and contraception. Furthermore, many homeless youth, particularly young women, turn to "survival sex"—exchanging sex for food, shelter, money, or protection.

Systemic racism is another significant factor. Many of the youth we serve are Black and face persistent discrimination in education, employment, and health care. This systemic inequity limits their access to resources and support systems, which can contribute to higher rates of unintended pregnancies.

Shelters and services for homeless youth often lack the resources or infrastructure to adequately address the needs of pregnant teens or young parents.

Tell us about the new location.

In early October, we moved into a large office in Mt Vernon (1111 Park Ave—across from the Cultural Center light rail stop). The space is divided into a drop-in/program space and a staff workspace. At this new location, youth can access:

- Traditional drop-in services like food, a kitchenette, hygiene supplies, and a warm and safe space
- Housing-focused support to obtain or maintain stable housing
- Youth-led, trauma-informed supportive services related to self-identified goals, including benefits assistance, employment connections, legal counseling, harm reduction, parenting/pregnancy support, and more

What role do youth play in shaping YES priorities?

YES was founded by youth facing homelessness and youth continue to determine the direction of the program. Youth were involved with developing YES' new strategic plan,



YES staff, Ciera Dunlap and Dana Carr, work with youth experiencing homelessness at their new drop-in location in Mt. Vernon.

in the interview process for new employees, and in the search for the new space. Youth provide live feedback to program staff daily and complete feedback surveys. We are currently working with a few youth to decorate and determine the layout of the new drop-in center.

What advocacy work are you focused on in 2025?

Maryland was recently awarded \$2 million to improve youth homelessness response systems in the state. YES is currently collaborating with the Baltimore City Youth Action Board, the State of Maryland, and the Baltimore City Continuum of Care—working to reduce barriers to housing and to ensure that youth voices guide the changes. Baltimore's existing homelessness response system encompasses shelters, outreach programs, housing providers, and other service organizations that work collaboratively to connect individuals to housing and supportive services. However, there is no comprehensive community plan focused on engaging and better-connecting youth to these vital services.

How can readers support?

Do your part to stop the stigma associated with housing instability. Learn about the root causes of youth homelessness and share that knowledge. Homelessness is not a personal failure.



To make a donation, drop off supplies or volunteer with YES, visit yesdropincenter.org.

40 YEARS!

2025 marks our *40th anniversary* as an agency—working to end homelessness in the community. As planning gets under way for commemorating this milestone, share your reflections, memories and hopes for the work ahead.



Meet our 2024 Core Value Awardees

Every year, Health Care for the Homeless staff come together to nominate – and celebrate – colleagues who embody our core values.

This year, our community lost Delvonja “Von” Bradshaw, Executive Assistant and a 30-year employee. Von's sisters accepted the "HCH-er at Heart" award on her behalf, and the award has been renamed in her honor.

Meet our awardees below and read more at www.hchmd.org/news.



Von Bradshaw Award
John Lane
Outreach Services Manager



DIGNITY
Molly Greenberg, RN
Harm Reduction Manager



AUTHENTICITY
Adrienne Burgess-Bromley
Case Management Coordinator



HOPE
Johanna Galat, LCSW-C
Behavioral Health Therapist



JUSTICE
Janaya Brown, LMSW
Therapist Case Manager



BALANCE
Tara Dorsey
Compliance and Quality Specialist



PASSION
Liz Galbrecht, CRNP
Nurse Practitioner

We're hiring!

Join these core value awardees by applying for one of our open positions.

hchmd.org/work-here



“It’s easy to be passionate about what you do when you work with such great people.”