

MARYLAND PSYCHIATRIC SOCIETY



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January 14, 2022

Letitia Dzirasa, M.D.
Commissioner of Health
Baltimore City Health Department
1001 East Fayette Street
Baltimore, MD 21202

Dear Doctor Dzirasa:

On behalf of the Maryland Psychiatric Society, a group of more than 750 psychiatrists and psychiatrists-in-training across the state of Maryland, we write to express our concern about the lack of shelter options for COVID positive individuals experiencing housing instability in the city of Baltimore.

Across the state, we are seeing patients experiencing homelessness presenting to emergency rooms and psychiatric emergency centers. Fortunately, many are stabilized in this setting and do not require inpatient psychiatric treatment. When this happens, we and our social work colleagues attempt to assist these individuals in finding shelter so they do not have to go back to the street. However, we are finding our efforts to help place individuals who have a positive COVID test hampered by the lack of available shelter options.

Currently, in our city of over 600,000, there is only one shelter that will provide services to COVID positive individuals: the Lord Baltimore. While we appreciate the Lord Baltimore's services, it is also worth noting that the Lord Baltimore has a limited number of beds they provide as shelter beds, and they have limited mental health services available.

This could not come at a worse time. It is well known that the Omicron variant is more infectious than prior versions of the virus. While thankfully many of these infections are mild, those of us in healthcare are seeing the strain it is placing on our work. Unfortunately, the rising numbers of positive patients also means that the limited number of COVID shelter beds is woefully inadequate. Increasingly, we are unable to find shelter for our patients who test positive for COVID-19 due to the lack of shelter beds that will accept these patients. When we are unable to do so, we have no choice but to discharge them back to the street where they are exposed to the brutal winter elements. This poses a greater risk to the public health and the safety of our city.

As winter continues, we implore you to act swiftly and decisively to create more

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shelter beds for individuals who have COVID. The current numbers of beds are not safe and not in the best interests of our patients. We need more shelter beds, and we need them now. It is no exaggeration to say that increasing the number of shelter beds for individuals with COVID-19 is a matter of life and death.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Virginia L. Ashley, M.D."

Virginia L. Ashley, M.D.

President