



Testimony in SUPPORT of SB503
SB503: Public Utilities - Gas Service Regulator Safety (Flower Branch Act)
Senate Finance Committee

Ana Martinez, On Behalf of CASA

February 16, 2021

Good Afternoon Chairman Davis and Members of the Committee:

CASA is pleased to provide **strong support for SB503, Public Utilities - Gas Service Regulator Safety, Flower Branch Act**. My name is Ana Martinez. As CASA's Lead Organizer in Montgomery County, I work very closely with our membership in the county, many of which were deeply impacted by the 2016 Flower Branch explosion, in which this bill is named.

CASA is the largest immigrant advocacy and services organization in the mid-Atlantic region with over 100,000 members in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. CASA has offices and organizes in many areas in the state, one being the Long Branch area of Montgomery County, the community that was devastated by the tragedy that occurred on August 10, 2016, when a gas explosion led to the death of seven neighbors, caused severe injuries to dozens more and displaced and traumatized hundreds of people. CASA has been working with the residents since the explosion and we continue to fight with them for justice.

After a lengthy investigation of the explosion lasting two and a half years, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released a comprehensive report that included their findings and recommendations. One of their many recommendations is that gas regulators need to be moved to the outside of building structures. Although no certain causes of the explosion could be determined, the report indicates that "the probable cause [of the explosion] was the failure of an indoor mercury service regular with an unconnected vent line that allowed natural gas into the meter room where it accumulated and ignited from an unknown ignition source. Contributing to the accident was the location of the mercury service regulators where leak detection by odor was not readily available."¹ The report makes several recommendations for how to prevent accidents like this in the future, including that service regulators be relocated outside of occupied structure. By moving

¹ National Transportation Safety Board. (April 24, 2019). *Building Explosion and Fire, Silver Spring, Maryland, August 10, 2016*. NTSB/PAR-19/01, PB2019-100722, available at: <http://199.173.155.35/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/PAR1901.pdf>

the regulators to the outside, it would provide better air circulation, and prevent another situation where gas is building up pressure inside an apartment building. SB503 does this exactly.

Despite the tragedy that our community has faced, action has still not been taken to protect tenants in a meaningful way. In 2019, another gas leak was detected by tenants in a building not far from the 2016 explosion. After advocacy from the tenants, the utility company checked the regulators in the complex, and found minor leaks in multiple buildings, strong enough that people could smell it. One of the residents who made the report, at first was told that there was no gas leak. When he found that he was given incorrect information he said, “I went to sleep last night, thinking everything was okay.” He was in shock that the same situation could have happened again. It wasn’t until this second incident, that most of the regulators were finally moved to the outside.

Our residents live with the trauma of the night of August 10, 2016 every single day. They remember running out of their building, the horrifying smell, the feeling of fear and confusion, and the images of their neighbors jumping out of buildings.

We have a responsibility to learn from what has happened and ensure that we prevent dangerous situations like these from ever happening again within our state. **CASA strongly supports SB503 and urges a favorable report.**

Ana Martinez
Lead Organizer, Montgomery County, CASA