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March 8, 2022

Senator William C. Smith, Jr., Chair
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Senator Paul G. Pinsky., Chair
Senate Education, Health and Environment Affairs Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: **FAVORABLE** – SB783 – Constitutional Amendment – Environmental Rights

Dear Chairmans Smith and Pinsky and Members of the Committee:

The Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI) has a long-standing history of advocating for families and children on the important issues of asthma and lead poisoning prevention and developing and delivering prevention resources to improve health and racial equity outcomes for Maryland's children and families. GHHI is dedicated to addressing the social determinants of health and the advancement of racial and health equity through healthy, safe and energy efficient homes. By delivering a standard of excellence in its work, GHHI aims to eradicate the negative health impacts of unhealthy housing and unjust policies for children, seniors, and families to ensure better health, economic and social outcomes for low-income communities of color. GHHI supports SB783 to create a fundamental right in Maryland to a healthy and sustainable environment.

Asthma

The burden of asthma, a chronic disease, greatly contributes to social inequalities in health outcomes and health disparities, which are neither inevitable nor irremediable, especially for children in Maryland. Determinants of health related to air quality and indoor environments are known to be significant contributing causes of asthma morbidity and exacerbations and disproportionately burden populations, especially children and minorities. Poor outdoor and indoor air quality and housing conditions such as mold, lack of ventilation, pests and other allergens contribute to asthma episodes for Maryland residents.

25 million Americans have asthma and it has been shown to be the cause of the biggest loss in productivity through school and work absenteeism. Nationally, 14.4 million school days and 14.2 million work days are missed due to asthma episodes. Over 500,000 adults and children in Maryland have diagnosed asthma. Research has shown that race, ethnicity and income are also common risk factors in asthma diagnoses and the impact of asthma episodes. Asthma-related

health disparities have disproportionately affected African American residents in Maryland, specifically children. Data available from the Maryland Asthma and Surveillance Report has demonstrated that African American asthmatics in Maryland visit the emergency room 5 times more often than White asthmatics and are hospitalized 2.7 times more often than White asthmatics in Maryland. Many asthma episodes are preventable, yet high rates of asthma related emergency department visits and hospitalizations result in substantial medical costs for the state and its residents – including \$42.1 million annually for asthma related hospitalizations and \$93.3 million for asthma related emergency department visits.

Lead Poisoning

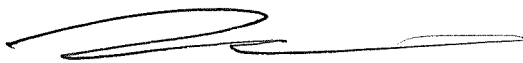
In 2019, there were 1,526 children with elevated blood levels (EBLs) of 5 µg/dl or higher in Maryland. Lead poisoning from lead in water, lead in paint and contaminated soil contributes to significant learning disabilities, loss of IQ, speech development problems, attention deficit disorder, poor school performance and violent, aggressive behavior that heavily burdens low income communities. Lead poisoning is irreversible and has a significant impact on societal costs. Lead poisoning directly contributes to the cycle of learning disabilities, poor school performance, steep school dropout rates and juvenile delinquency that prevent low income children in particular from being able to thrive and which burdens the State through increased special education and criminal justice costs.

Healthy and Stable Communities

Minority populations in Maryland are disproportionately impacted by the unhealthy air and water and hazardous conditions that exist in their homes and communities and are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Maryland needs to advance holistic, comprehensive solutions to improving air and water quality and creating healthy, energy efficient and stable housing that improves health outcomes while reducing the effects of climate change on low income communities. A constitutional amendment will result in more aggressive prevention policies and enforcement of existing laws to mitigate environmental hazards and climate change. These changes are needed to address unhealthy environments and unsafe and unstable housing that produce health and social disparities for minority children, families and older adults including: rates of lead poisoning, asthma episodes (emergency department visits and hospitalizations), household injury, household income and energy and medical cost burdens.

Seven states in the United States (Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island) have adopted environmental rights as a fundamental right in their state constitutions. Maryland must ensure that our air is safe to breathe and that the water and environment in our communities, schools and homes are free of lead and other contaminants. To improve racial and health equity, we must commit to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for all Marylanders. We ask for a Favorable report on SB783.

Respectfully Submitted,



Ruth Ann Norton
President and CEO