

City of Annapolis
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Office of Emergency Management
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**In Support of MD 2023 HB 789
Public Safety - State Disaster Recovery Fund**

*Appropriations Committee Hearing
Thursday, March 9, 2023*

Chair Barnes, Vice-Chair Chang, and fellow members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am Kevin J Simmons, Director of the Office of Emergency Management for the City of Annapolis. I offer this testimony to voice my support for House Bill 789, a bill that provides local units of government, such as the City of Annapolis, with the capability to access state recovery funding in the aftermath of a localized disaster.

Currently, there are significant limitations in the State's ability to provide recovery assistance to locally impacted residents, businesses, and nonprofit organizations of such disasters. Due to not having a current mechanism for the State to fill the gap between local and federal disaster recovery funding, local governments are often left unable to meet the needs of their communities when all local recovery assistance means have been exhausted. HB 789 aims to remove these limitations with the establishment of a State Disaster Recovery Fund administered by the Maryland Department of Emergency Management.

This Bill fills a critical gap in local disaster recovery by allowing local governments to access state disaster funding when local funding has been exhausted and federal assistance is not granted. In the fall of 2021, the City of Annapolis sustained substantial damage from a localized disaster in which residents are suffering because of this gap in assistance and still have not recovered a year and six months later.

On September 1, 2021, an unprecedented category EF-2 tornado struck the City of Annapolis resulting in over 100 homes, businesses, and local non-profit organizations within Annapolis and Anne Arundel County being damaged or completely destroyed. The Parole neighborhood, a historic Black and Brown community, was one of the hardest-hit areas in Annapolis. Many of the impacted residents are seniors living on fixed incomes or are families living in generational housing with incomes below the poverty level, and many of the homes were uninsured or underinsured. As a result, the ability for the community to start the recovery process was significantly delayed by there not being dedicated funds to assist individuals and households after local resources were exhausted.

By not having either a State Emergency Declaration issued or a Presidential Disaster Declaration granted, local governments are only able to rely on a local disaster declaration which does not currently authorize access to State disaster recovery programs. The City of Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, and local non-governmental organizations continue to provide as much assistance as possible, yet, residents continue to be met with extensive challenges in state bureaucracy when trying to utilize State programs activated outside of a State Emergency Declaration.

In the absence of a State and Presidential Disaster Declaration, the former Governor answered the request of the local governments to allocate state funds for recovery assistance. The Governor directed \$4 million to the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to activate its disaster and disaster-applicable housing and community programs. These programs were initially offered in the form of loans, however, being a responsible community, the residents of Parole understood the challenges that would be presented in taking on the burden of a loan. Many of the families in the Parole community can not afford loan repayments and will not risk future generations not being able to own their family homes due to encumbrances from such loans. In working with the DHCD, these loans were eventually transitioned into a grant program, yet, significant delays and obstacles are still occurring.

As referenced in the *Recommendations for the Establishment of a State Disaster Relief Fund report to the Maryland General Assembly* as required by SB310/Ch. 491, 2022 and HB386/Ch. 490, 2022, the residential disaster programs administered by the DHCD are not currently capable to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of local residents with timely and accessible disaster recovery assistance. Had there been an ability for local governments to access a state disaster recovery fund as proposed in HB 789, it would have allowed the City of Annapolis to provide equitable disaster recovery assistance to its residents in a quick and fiscally responsible manner.

Additionally, the ability for the fund to support disaster case management services, as proposed in HB 789, fills another critical gap in local disaster recovery operations. Effective case management is a vital component to efficiently assist individuals and families recovering from a disaster. Local governments can quickly become overwhelmed when a disaster strikes. Following the Annapolis tornado, the City was unable to fill the gap of needing additional disaster case management support through current State or Federal programs. With the denial of a Presidential Disaster Declaration, FEMA's disaster case management services, including the reimbursement for locally administered services, were not made available.

As an experienced first responder, incident management team coordinator, deputy fire chief, and executive director within the field of emergency management for the past 40 years, I can attest to the benefits of HB 789 being summarized in the following key points:

1. HB 789 provides disaster recovery relief for small Maryland cities and towns as well as the counties and Baltimore City;
2. The disaster recovery fund will be managed and administered by the Maryland Department of Emergency Management and local appointed emergency managers, the industry experts in disaster recovery; and
3. The disaster recovery fund will focus on the recovery of lower income and underserved communities ensuring no one is left behind.

I respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee look favorably upon this legislation that would allow the City of Annapolis, along with other local governments, to quickly act and provide essential recovery assistance to its community following a localized disaster through the establishment of the State Disaster Recovery Fund.

Sincerely,



Kevin J Simmons
Director, Office of Emergency Management
City of Annapolis