



February 3, 2023

Housing and Community Development - Homeowner's Extreme Weather Mitigation and Preparation Grant Program (HB0190)

Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENT

Dear Chairperson Barve and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

Blue Water Baltimore and Clean Water Action write today in support of Housing and Community Development - Homeowner's Extreme Weather Mitigation and Preparation Grant Program (HB0190) with a suggested amendment.

Extreme weather poses numerous threats to residents' homes, and water damage can cost thousands of dollars to address and repair. We want to draw your attention to a specific type of water damage that is frequently caused and exacerbated by heavy rain events, residential sewage backups, and how this legislation could help impacted residents.

Residential sewage backups pose significant dangers to residents' health, cause significant damage to homes, and require immediate attention and resources to fix. These backups happen thousands of times each year in Baltimore and disproportionately affect Black residents due to a long history of segregation, redlining, environmental racism, and inequitable investments in infrastructure.^{1,2}

While sewage backups can occur in wet or dry weather, extreme rain events – which are increasing in frequency due to the climate crisis³ – increase the likelihood that the city's aging pipes will become overwhelmed and force raw sewage through basement-level toilets, floor drains, and washing machines in residents' homes. Furthermore, actions taken by the City to comply with the 2002 federal consent decree have actually increased the rate of sewage backups.⁴ When closing off overflow points that discharge sewage directly into local waterways, the City inadvertently increased the number of sewage backups in the homes of Baltimore City residents. In 2004, there were 622 reports of sewage backups. In 2015, there were over 5,000 reported.⁵

Recognizing the severe impacts of sewage backups on residents, Baltimore City established two programs to help residents who face sewage backups in their homes. The first is the Expedited Reimbursement Program (ERP),⁶ which was launched in 2018 as a requirement under the Modified Consent Decree to provide limited financial reimbursement for the costs of cleaning and disinfection

¹ Faith C. Ezell. (2019). [Residential Sewage Backups in Baltimore City](#). Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

² Ian Duncan. (2017). ["Study finds deep racial disparities in way Baltimore allocates public construction dollars."](#) The Baltimore Sun.

³ Ron Cassie. (2019). ["Hell and High Water: Climate Change Is Already Wreaking Havoc On The City's Infrastructure And Public Health. How Will Baltimore Cope With The Staggering Challenges To Come?"](#) Baltimore Magazine.

⁴ Tom Pelton. (2016). ["Baltimore Admits to Mistakes in Sewage Project, But Refuses to Help Victims."](#) WYPR.

⁵ Eric Harkleroad and Matt McDonald. (2021). ["Deluges and denials: Baltimore reimbursement program leaves residents burdened with sewage backups costs."](#) The Baltimore Sun.

⁶ Baltimore City Department of Public Works. (n.d.). ["Basement Backup Reimbursement Program."](#)

after a sewage backup. The second, the Sewage Onsite Support (SOS) program, was launched in March 2021 to provide direct cleanup assistance to residents by deploying licensed contractors directly to their homes.⁷

While the ERP and SOS programs are important steps, both are flawed due to strict qualification criteria and lack of public awareness about the programs. Our organizations have made six key recommendations to Baltimore City to improve these programs, including expanding their scope and making it easier for residents to qualify for support.⁸ The Department of Public Works (DPW) frequently cites lack of funding as a barrier to expanding the ERP and SOS programs.⁹

The Homeowner's Extreme Weather Mitigation and Preparation Grant Program proposed in this bill could be a valuable source of funding for Baltimore's sewage backup assistance programs and enable Baltimore City to expand its ERP and SOS programs. In order to maximize the program's impact, we encourage you to raise the grant cap from \$5,000 to \$10,000 to more accurately reflect the actual costs of remediation after a sewage backup.¹⁰

We urge a favorable report on HB0190 with this amendment.

Sincerely,

Taylor Smith-Hams
Advocacy & Outreach Senior Manager, Blue Water Baltimore

Jennifer Kunze
Maryland Program Coordinator, Clean Water Action

⁷ Baltimore City Department of Public Works. (n.d.). "[Sewage Onsite Support \(SOS\) Cleanup Program](#)."

⁸ Taylor Smith-Hams, Alice Volpitta, and Jennifer Kunze. (2022). [Expanding Baltimore City's Sewage Backup Assistance Programs](#). Blue Water Baltimore and Clean Water Action.

⁹ Baltimore City Department of Public Works. (2021). [A Report On Sewage Backup Expedited Reimbursement And Direct Assistance Program](#). Pp. 22-25.

¹⁰ Basement Guides. (2023). "[Average Cost of Sewage Cleanup](#)."