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TESTIMONY ON HB243 - POSITION: UNFAVORABLE

Property Tax - Tax Sales - Revisions

TO: Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee

FROM: Jacquelyn Filson

My name is Jacquelyn Filson, and I'm a resident of District 40. I'm submitting this testimony on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ) in opposition to HB243, Property Tax - Tax Sales - Revisions, as it is currently written. JUFJ organizes 6,000 Jews and allies from across the state in support of social, racial, and economic justice campaigns. JUFJ has been working for years alongside our partners in the Baltimore Right to Water Coalition to address inequities and lack of due process in Baltimore City's water billing system.

Jewish tradition teaches that water is life and that housing is crucial. Denying residents either, regardless of their ownership status, is a denial of human rights. This is why we fought so hard for the passage of the Water Taxpayer Protection Act in 2019—to put an end to the immoral practice of selling people's homes and places of worship at tax sale for water bills.

I'm a renter in Baltimore and a long-time advocate for safe, affordable, and public water. Starting in 2017 with Food & Water Watch, I began working on affordable water in Baltimore specifically—and have continued in various capacities since. Through this work, I have learned a lot about how the water system functions or, more accurately, how it fails to function.

In Baltimore City specifically, the Baltimore City Department of Public Works (DPW) has a decades-long, documented history of sending residents incorrect water bills, sometimes off by as much as thousands of dollars. Imagine receiving a \$1400 bill for one month of water, and then the city proceeding to put your home up for tax sale because you can't pay it. Before the protections that HB243 would snatch away, that happened to many Baltimore residents. Why would our leaders, elected to represent our interests as residents, want to put any of us at risk of such an egregious act? It's even worse to propose bringing it back as a tool for targeting folks living in homes without ownership status—a full third of the state's residents and a disproportionately Black and low-income population.

In 2019, when we passed the Water Taxpayer Protection Act and the Water Accountability and Equity Act, we started the work of improving Baltimore's broken water billing system. However,

that work is not done and the water system remains riddled with inaccuracies. Passing HB243 would not only put vulnerable Baltimore residents at risk of losing their homes over unpaid water bills, it would put Baltimoreans at risk of losing their homes over *incorrect* water bills.

The fact is, when people can afford their bills, they pay them. If people aren't paying their water bills, it's a failure by the system. And what do we get out of rendering our fellow residents homeless when they're already financially struggling? More vacant properties and sparse neighborhoods hurt Baltimore City and Maryland as a whole. Many tax sale purchases do not even generate revenue for our local government and just drive profit for investors. If anything, we should extend more support and care to our neighbors in need, not wrench away the only assets they have left to keep them afloat in the name of industry profit.

With my background in water affordability and as a lifelong renter, I am appalled that our leaders are considering bringing back the unconscionable exercise of wrenching away peoples' homes over water debt. We believe strongly that the bill before you no longer represents the original intent of the Governor and administration, which we had supported. **I respectfully urge this committee to return an unfavorable report on HB243 and show us they care just as much about their residents as the 2019 General Assembly, not less.**