



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

HB 408 — PUBLIC UTILITIES — GAS SERVICE REGULATOR SAFETY  
(FLOWER BRANCH ACT)

TESTIMONY OF DELEGATE LORIG CHARKOUDIAN

FEBRUARY 13, 2020

Chair Davis, Vice Chair Dumais and Members of the Economic Matters Committee

On August 10, 2016, a natural gas explosion and fire at the Flower Branch Apartment Complex in Silver Spring, resulted in seven deaths (including two children), and injured 65 residents and three firefighters. The late-night explosion destroyed two buildings in the apartment complex, located in an area that is mostly home to low-income residents. More than three years after the explosion, as hearings and the legal process continue to slowly move forward, the community is still traumatized, and the victims continue to seek justice.

An investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) concluded that the cause of the explosion was the failure of a mercury service regulator (MSR) left unconnected to a venting pipe. The unconnected vent line and failed service regulator resulted in a leak of natural gas that accumulated in the apartment building's meter room until it reached explosive levels and ignited.

The NTSB recommended that the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA)

1. Require that all new service regulators be installed outside occupied structures.
2. Require existing interior service regulators be relocated outside occupied structures whenever the gas service line, meter, or regulator is replaced. In addition, multifamily structures should be prioritized over single-family dwellings.<sup>1</sup>

However, a recent report by the US Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General found that PHMSA is significantly behind in their implementation of agency mandates and

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<sup>1</sup> NTSB findings (exec summary) <https://www.nts.gov/news/events/Documents/DCA16FP003-abstract.pdf>

recommendations.<sup>2</sup> PHMSA and the NTSB continue to be in conversation on the status of those recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

Since PHMSA is seriously delayed in their rule-making process, this bill will put NTSB's recommendations in Maryland State law. The proposed bill will require the following:

- The outside installation of the gas service regulator when gas service is newly installed in an occupied structure,
- The movement of existing interior installed gas service regulators to the outside of the structure whenever the gas service line, meter, or regulator is replaced; and
- On or before October 1, 2025, in multifamily residential structures, existing interior gas service regulators must be relocated to the outside of the structures.

The passing of this bill, and the full implementation of the proposed regulations, will prevent another Flower Branch tragedy.

I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 408.

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<sup>2</sup> DOT OIG report

<https://www.oig.dot.gov/sites/default/files/PHMSA%20Progress%20Implementing%20Mandates%20and%20Recommendations%20Final%20Report%5E10-14-16.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> NTSB Safety Recommendation P-19-001 [https://ntsb.gov/safety/safety-recs/\\_layouts/ntsb.recsearch/Recommendation.aspx?Rec=P-19-001](https://ntsb.gov/safety/safety-recs/_layouts/ntsb.recsearch/Recommendation.aspx?Rec=P-19-001)