



Maryland General Assembly
House Economic Matters Committee
February 15, 2022

Testimony of Alexandra Wyatt
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GRID Alternatives

SB 528, Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022

Sponsors: Senators Pinsky, Ferguson, Kelley, Guzzone, Smith, Kagan, Waldstreicher, Lam, Washington, Patterson, Hester, Ellis, Zucker, Kramer, Hettleman, Young, Sydnor, Hayes, Watson, Beidle, Carter, Augustine, Elfreth, Feldman, Jackson, King, and Lee

Position: FAVORABLE

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 528, the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022. My name is Alexandra Wyatt and I am Policy Director and Legal Counsel for GRID Alternatives, the nation's largest nonprofit solar installer. Our regional affiliate GRID Alternatives Mid-Atlantic (GRID Mid-Atlantic) operates in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, providing solar job training and no-cost solar installations to underserved and low-income customers. GRID Mid-Atlantic offers these comments in support of SB 528 and requests a **favorable** report in committee. We also suggest targeted amendments that could make the legislation even stronger and more equity-focused.

GRID Mid-Atlantic's Experience Providing Equitable Climate Solutions

GRID Mid-Atlantic's mission is to build community-powered solutions to advance economic, environmental, and climate justice through renewable energy. GRID Mid-Atlantic began operations in 2014 and serves Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia with single-family rooftop, multifamily affordable housing, and community solar installations. By bringing together community partners, local volunteers, and job trainees to implement solar power and energy efficiency for local residents, GRID Mid-Atlantic has completed more than 350 solar electric systems in the region, saving more than a thousand low-income households over \$17 million in lifetime electricity costs.

At GRID Mid-Atlantic, we believe in creating a rapid, equitable transition to clean energy that includes everyone. GRID Mid-Atlantic works with unemployed and underemployed residents of low-income and underserved communities to overcome barriers to employment in the growing solar energy industry. To date, GRID Mid-Atlantic has provided more than 950 people in the region with hands-on solar training. GRID Mid-Atlantic's work has included successfully implementing the Solar Works DC Training Program, which is a Solar for All program of the District of Columbia's Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) and Department of Employment Services (DOES) for hands-on solar job training and solar



installation for qualified low-income District residents.¹ GRID Mid-Atlantic also hosts fellows through the national SolarCorps Fellowship Program, supported by AmeriCorps and corporate and foundation support. SolarCorps fellows join GRID Mid-Atlantic for paid, eleven-month terms in a variety of installation, outreach, program implementation, and workforce development roles.

Communities Disproportionately Affected by Climate Change

While GRID Mid-Atlantic strongly supports the development of a methodology for identifying communities disproportionately affected by climate change (section 1-702), we are concerned that “community” is defined in an exclusively geographic way. However, places are not people, and individuals and households may be disproportionately affected even if they live outside the physical boundaries of a particular defined area such as a Census tract. Our society structurally disadvantages people on the basis of income, disability, gender, race, ethnicity, language, prior incarceration, and a host of other intersecting circumstances that travel with people wherever they go. Moreover, gentrification—itsself exacerbated by climate change²—and other factors drive people and families into and out of particular geographic areas at an increasing pace. Geographic definitions are important, but if they are the only measure, the result will be sacrificing real equity for administrative oversimplification. Maryland should instead follow the example of the federal Justice40 Initiative, which issued interim guidance to federal agencies last year indicating that agencies “should define community as “either a group of individuals living in geographic proximity to one another, *or* a geographically dispersed set of individuals (such as migrant workers or Native Americans), where either type of group experiences common conditions” (emphasis added).³

It is also crucial that members of priority communities be involved in the creation and implementation of these definitions, and other aspects of the bill. Lawmakers should consider allowing compensation and enhanced stipends for members of the Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities representing environmental justice communities. Moreover, the Commission should not merely *solicit* input from all segments of the population that will be impacted by the policies it develops; it should create and fund means for engaging in proactive, culturally competent outreach and engagement in partnership with local organizations, and for compensating community members for their time and expertise via surveys, meetings, or other avenues for input.

Workforce Development

GRID Mid-Atlantic applauds the bill’s creation of a Maryland Climate Justice Corps Program. However, we are concerned with the six-month commitment target, which may limit participation from

¹ See <https://gridalternatives.org/regions/midatlantic/solar-works-dc>.

² See, e.g., <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/what-climate-gentrification>.

³ Shalanda D. Young, Brenda Mallory, and Gina McCarthy, *Memorandum for the Heads Of Departments and Agencies re: Interim Implementation Guidance for the Justice40 Initiative* at 2 (July 20, 2021), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/M-21-28.pdf>.



communities most underrepresented in relevant industries and which may also unnecessarily exclude shorter-term programs with a track record of success. For example, the job-training component of the well-established Solar Works DC Training Program serves several training cohorts per year including regular cohorts that participate in 12 weeks of training, and a summer youth program that follows a 6-week course.

GRID Mid-Atlantic is also concerned that participants in the Maryland Climate Justice Corps Program would be deemed “stipend volunteers” and could only “receive a stipend, as determined by the Trust, based on the needs of the stipend volunteer and the limits of budgetary appropriations.” Many people, including young people, simply cannot take extended periods without family-sustaining wages and benefits. The Maryland Climate Justice Corps Program should not amount to just a local version of a “service trip” where young adults with means go to underserved areas as a matter of charity. Rather, it can and should play a meaningful role in expanding the benefits of the clean energy transition, including high quality careers, to members of all communities. To build a genuinely inclusive and just clean energy future, training stipends and other program components must be robust enough to attract and benefit participants from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances.

Other Provisions

GRID Mid-Atlantic strongly supports other provisions in the bill, including but not limited to:

- the improved overall climate targets; the creation of Climate Catalytic Capital Fund targeting the implementation of energy and weatherization measures for low- to moderate-income households;
- the exemption from property tax for certain distributed solar systems including community solar serving low- and moderate-income customers;
- the requirements for solar-ready new buildings; and
- the development of plans for funding the retrofit of covered buildings to comply with building emissions standards, especially for affordable housing providers and low-income households.

The climate crisis is a multifaceted problem rooted in historical and ongoing injustices. Thus, it is not only appropriate but urgently necessary for Maryland to take a comprehensive and justice-oriented approach to addressing it.

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GRID Mid-Atlantic is very pleased to see Maryland’s leaders prioritizing climate ambition and equity. We thank you for your consideration of SB 528, the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022, and we hope that you will advance it.