

KATIE FRY HESTER
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Howard and Montgomery Counties

Education, Energy, and
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB0830 - Environmental Health Specialists and On-Site Sewage Disposal Systems - Studies (Environmental Health Systems Support Act of 2023)

March 30th, 2023

Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee, thank you for your consideration of SB830, which will commission two studies to improve the efficiency and consistency by which our local health departments and environmental health staff operate.

As members of this Committee are well aware, septic systems are an extremely complicated and costly piece of the construction process for Maryland's homeowners and small businesses – often reaching north of \$10,000. Since 2021, I have worked with MDE, MDH, industry, and other key stakeholders to improve this process. For those of you who were here last year, you may recall that over the course of the 2021 interim, MDE established a working group which engaged across the state through 6 listening sessions with industry practitioners, government employees and key stakeholders from the building industry and agri-tourism industry. I have provided the results of these working groups along with my testimony. In summary, we found that:

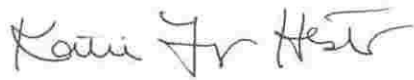
- the time it takes for approval varies dramatically from 1-18 months, often without adequate and consistent communication between our local health departments and permit applicants,
- there is significant confusion between the regulatory authorities of MDH and MDE, resulting in the two agencies pointing fingers at one another instead of solving the problem at hand,
- the state has not adequately supported our local environmental health specialists in terms of hiring staff, paying competitive salaries, and upgrading the necessary IT systems for the job, and
- that certain COMAR regulations are unclear, resulting in varying and haphazard interpretations.

The solution to improving this industry is multifaceted. Last year, we passed Vice Chair Stein's bill to increase licensing requirements for private septic system inspectors. However, we still need to work on the public sector side. In order to push this process forward, SB0830 requires

the Department to conduct two studies: one on staffing needs, wage competitiveness, and educational requirements, and another to review our state's current structure of delegated authority for environmental health staff.

As this Committee continues to consider solutions for rebuilding state government, improving the quality of public services, and increasing the availability of affordable housing, our environmental health bureaus will be key partners. For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB830

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sen. Katie Fry Hester
District 9 - Howard & Montgomery County