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## **HB0538 — Income Tax — Subtraction Modification — Water Affordability Assistance**

**Hearing before the House Ways and Means Committee, February 16, 2023**

**Position: SUPPORT (FAV)**

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Low-income renters are frequently burdened by unaffordable and fluctuating water bills. Public Justice Center has assisted renters who are facing eviction as a result of unaffordable water bills. While non-rent charges typically cannot be sought as a basis for eviction in Failure to Pay Rent court, landlords can apply payments that a renter thought would go toward rent toward water bills instead. These water bills thus leave renters with rent arrears that result in the renter losing their housing altogether.

This problem is exacerbated by the often widely-fluctuating nature of water bills, making it more difficult for renters to plan ahead and avoid falling short. For example, Public Justice Center worked with a renter who experienced a sudden 300 percent increase in her water bill. Her water consumption had not changed, but she learned that the increase correlated with new management adopting a new method of dividing water usage among the many units in the apartment building. The unexpected cost made her unable to make her full rent payment that month, and her landlord sought an eviction against her.

The problem of water affordability is widespread. In the last two decades, water prices in Baltimore City have risen 500 percent. By 2019, more than half of Baltimore City residents could not afford their water bill, and the problem is particularly concentrated in low-income, predominantly-Black neighborhoods. Access to water is therefore a problem of housing security, race equity, and public health in Baltimore City.

Low-income tenants often rely on multiple subsidies in order to remain housed and support themselves and their families. No one should have to choose between affording water and meeting other basic needs. HB0538 is an important step toward water equity in Baltimore City. Public Justice Center asks that the Committee issue a report of FAVORABLE on HB0538. If you have any questions, please contact: Samantha Gowing, gowings@publicjustice.org, 410-625-9409, ext. 273.