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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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SPONSOR TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1242
PUBLIC UTILITIES - LEAD TELECOMMUNICATIONS CABLES - REGULATION AND REPORT

Delegate Sheila Ruth
March 7, 2024

Bell System manhole located at the front entrance of St. Anne's Parish (199 Duke of Gloucester St)

In the past several decades, lawmakers, regulators, and private industry have made great strides in removing lead from "worst offenders" like paint and gasoline. Just in 2022, the EPA allocated $3 billion to replace lead water pipes, with a 2023 proposal seeking to replace all lead pipes within ten years. However, the lead contained in telecommunication cables has largely been ignored. From the invention of the telephone in the 1870s up until the 1960s, copper telecom cables were covered with an outer layer of lead in order to protect the wires inside. When industry standards shifted to plastic coverings in the 1960s and then fiber optics in the new millennium, old copper lines were left to rot. Last year, *The Wall Street Journal* released a massive report detailing this sprawling network of lead-sheathed cables. They have been found next to bus stops, schools, fishing spots, and playgrounds. In several locations tested, lead levels in the ground were well above thresholds deemed safe by the EPA.

While telecommunications companies are federally required to file copper retirement plans when making the switch to fiber optics, this has proved insufficient in ensuring proper disposal. The Communications Workers of America has filed several complaints with local utilities regulators about the retirement process. Testimonies demonstrate rampant abandonment of damaged and unsecured poles, coverings, and cables by telecom companies, threatening both workers and communities. *The Wall Street Journal's* report confirmed with several former executives that industry practice has been to leave lead-sheathed cables in place. For example, it is estimated that nationally, 15% of all of Verizon's copper wires are lead-sheathed. That is 81,000 miles and affects millions of customers.

That 15% is only an average. The *Journal* report quoted a 2010 AT&T presentation that stated that "some older metropolitan areas may still have over 50% lead cable." This is a particularly concerning number when you consider how old Maryland's telecom systems are. The Bell Telephone Company introduced service in Baltimore in 1877 and expanded into Washington D.C. the following year. Chesapeake & Potomac, the Bell System subsidiary that would hold a century-long monopoly in Maryland, was founded in 1883, meaning there are 90 years worth of potentially lead-sheathed cables in our communities. Signs are everywhere. My office has found three different Bell System manholes on State and Church Circles here in Annapolis. Two more were found in a residential neighborhood in Baltimore, and a sixth right in front of a dormitory at the University of Maryland. Lead could be right below our feet without us knowing it.

Both New York and Arizona have launched state investigations into the issue of lead-sheathed cables. In Verizon's letter to New York, they do not deny the presence of lead cables. In fact, they disclose how some of their records are so detailed as to have the precise coordinates of manholes, giving much insight into potential presence of lead. If we want to understand the environmental and health impact of lead cables, we first need to know where they are.

As amended, HB1242 would require telecommunications companies with operating authority from the Public Service Commission (PSC) to submit a report to the PSC and the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) on the lead-sheathed cables under their control and an assessment of their risk. This bill would also give MDE the authority to assess lead levels and establish plans to ensure the safe remediation of lead-sheathed cables. I ask for a favorable report for HB1242.