



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

Senate Bill 96

Environment – Impact of Environmental Permits and State Agency Actions
In the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee - Hearing on March 5, 2024
Position: FAVORABLE

Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) submits its written and oral testimony on SB 96 at the invitation of bill sponsor Senator Michael Jackson.

MLA is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to thousands of the State's low-income and vulnerable residents. Our 12 offices serve residents in each of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions and handle a range of civil legal matters. Many of our clients live within Baltimore City and pollutant-overburdened communities, where their health and the health of their children is adversely affected by negative environmental conditions.

MLA asks that the Committee report **favorably** on SB 96.

Environmental Justice Scores in Baltimore City

All people deserve to live in an environment where they are protected from public health hazards, however this is not a reality for certain Marylanders. Communities of color and low-income people have become overburdened with pollutants due to their proximity to facilities that emit dangerous chemicals. Residents and workers in the southern part of Baltimore City are particularly at risk.

Environmental justice scores were created to identify areas most at risk for health impacts from environmental burdens. Every census tract in Maryland has an environmental justice score. The score is calculated based on pollution burden exposure, pollution burden environmental effects, sensitive populations, and socioeconomic indicators.¹

In Baltimore City, there are 199 census tracts. Of Baltimore City's 199 tracts, 154 tracts have an environmental justice score in the 75th percentile or above.² 77% of Baltimore City residents live in the worst environmental conditions in the state. They suffer from disparate pollution burdens and toxic exposures, which results in health vulnerabilities.

The Impact on Public Health

The health of the residents of Baltimore City suffers because they are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. The rate of asthma-related hospitalizations in Baltimore City is double the rate for Maryland.³ High rates of asthma have been linked to air pollution.⁴ Studies show that the risk of developing

¹ See https://mde.maryland.gov/Environmental_Justice/Pages/EJ-Screening-Tool.aspx

² All referenced data came from the Maryland Department of the Environment's Environmental Justice Screening tool, which is an interactive online tool that can be found at: <https://mdewin64.mde.state.md.us/EJ/>

³ See <https://www.environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Baltimore-Asthma.pdf>

⁴ See <https://aafa.org/asthma/asthma-triggers-causes/air-pollution-smog-asthma/>

cancer that is associated with toxic air exposure disproportionately falls onto Maryland's socioeconomically disadvantaged and African American communities.⁵ In Baltimore City, the cancer mortality rate is 33% higher than in other parts of the state.⁶

The Impact on Academic Performance in Children

Conditions in schools, such as ambient air quality, have been shown to affect both the health and learning potential of students.⁷ A study that assessed the impact that air quality has on student achievement and student health in Baltimore City found that the indoor air in Baltimore City schools frequently exceeded the guidelines for acceptable levels of PM_{2.5}, NO₂, and CO₂, especially during the winter.⁸ Ambient air pollution has been associated with declines in academic performance and increases in absenteeism among children.⁹ The impact of living in an pollutant-overburdened area is actively negatively impacting the growth and academic performance of children in Baltimore City. MLA routinely represents families and children in Baltimore City whose health and academic progress are impacted by exposure to these pollutants.

The passage of SB 96 provides Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) the authority to protect citizens who live in areas of high public health concern, by denying permits or requiring mitigation efforts. This will protect low-income individuals living in high-risk communities, which aligns with MLA's mission to advocate for people living in poverty and to bring meaningful change to the systems that impact them.

For these reasons, **MLA urges the Committee to issue a FAVORABLE REPORT and PASSAGE of SB 96.** If you have any questions, please contact Genna Amick, (443) 934-7026, gamick@mdl.org.

⁵ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1257593/>

⁶ See https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/cancer/cancerplan/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/Cancer-MD-Maryland_FINAL%20-1.pdf

⁷ See <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1438463918300713>

⁸ See https://cfpub.epa.gov/ncer_abstracts/index.cfm/fuseaction/display.abstractDetail/abstract_id/10237/report/F

⁹ See <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1438463918300713>