

Bill Title: SB978 CHERISH Our Communities Act

Position: SUPPORT

To: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

From: Walkiria Pool, CEO on behalf of Centro de Apoyo Familiar

Dear Honorable Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

As a resident of Maryland and a representative of Centro de Apoyo Familiar, **I am writing to express my strong support for [SB978](#), the CHERISH Our Communities Act.**

The CHERISH Our Communities Act will address the disproportionate environmental and public health harms that environmental justice communities in Maryland face from pollution-generating facilities. For centuries, these facilities have been disproportionately and deliberately sited in minority and economically distressed communities in Maryland. Low-wealth, Black, and other communities of color in Maryland [face greater cancer risks and exposure to air toxics](#) due to higher pollution burden.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act amends Maryland's environmental law to provide adequate environmental impact assessment and opportunities for public participation for new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits issued by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE). Currently, many environmental permit applications do not include a public engagement process and do not take into consideration the cumulative harms posed by multiple and historic sources of pollution. The CHERISH Act prioritizes Maryland residents' well-being and ensures that MDE's decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive.

Personal stories add depth to the importance of SB978:

- If your or someone in your family's health has been impacted by pollution in your community, I urge you to think about their well-being.
- If you have tried to protest the permit for a polluting facility and found that the state can't or won't take action, know that the CHERISH Act will give the state the specific legislative authority to take action.
- If you know of a facility near you that is polluting, and want more transparency about it, the CHERISH Act would make sure that information is easily available online when it impacts environmental justice areas.

Technical background on the health impacts:

Polluting factories, fossil fuel shipment facilities, trash incinerators, and landfills release harmful emissions that have severe health impacts, including respiratory issues, cardiovascular diseases, and higher cancer risks. Environmental justice communities bear this disproportionate burden due to the cumulative pollution from these facilities. There is an urgent need for targeted protections in Maryland's permitting system to safeguard these communities.

Details about what the bill does:

- The bill identifies the 25% most polluted communities in the state using the Maryland EJ Screening Tool.

- Companies and other entities that pollute the environment must apply for permits from MDE. When specific types of facilities apply for air, land, and water permits to pollute in or near an identified community, the applicant must include an Environmental Impact Statement and an Existing Burden Report.
- Based on the provided information, public comments, review from other government entities, and its own analysis, MDE will determine whether issuing the permit would cause increased potential for adverse impacts on the community. If it will, MDE will deny the permit (for new or expanding permits) or require additional permit conditions and a Cumulative Impacts Mitigation Fund Agreement (for renewal permits).
- MDE will make information about enforcement actions against permitted facilities easily available online and direct 25% of penalties from enforcement actions to the impacted communities.

This targeted approach, based on priorities identified by environmental justice communities in Maryland, fills a critical gap in MDE's current permitting authority to protect public health in Maryland's most polluted communities.

Centro de Apoyo Familiar wholeheartedly supports SB978. We believe this bill is essential for promoting environmental justice and safeguarding the well-being of Maryland's residents.

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