

Testimony Supporting SB 978 Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee Written Testimony (submitted February 21, 2025)

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

As Maryland residents and faculty who lead programs in occupational and environmental health at Johns Hopkins University, we write to express our strong support of SB978, the CHERISH Our Communities Act. Currently, Maryland's permitting system for polluting facilities does not consider the cumulative impact of multiple pollution sources in a single area. This oversight has led to a concentration of polluting facilities in historically marginalized and economically distressed communities, resulting in elevated cancer risks and increased exposure to harmful air toxicants for these vulnerable populations. Workers in these communities are often the most directly impacted by these environmental hazards, as they face daily exposures to harmful pollutants in their workplaces.

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. The Act amends Maryland's environmental law to provide adequate environmental impact assessment and opportunities for public participation for new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits that are issued by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE). Investing in community health directly enhances worker well-being by effectively addressing environmental hazards and workplace exposures. This proactive strategy not only improves individual health outcomes but also boosts productivity, stimulates economic growth, and reduces healthcare costs.

The CHERISH Act offers significant economic and social benefits that support worker well-being:
(a) Job Creation: By encouraging cleaner industries and technologies, the act can stimulate green job growth in affected communities, potentially creating safer and healthier job opportunities;
(b) Healthcare Cost Reduction: Improved air and water quality can lead to better public health outcomes, potentially reducing healthcare costs for workers, employers, and communities;
(c) Community Revitalization: The act's provisions for community benefits agreements can lead to investments in local infrastructure and services, contributing to overall community improvement and potentially enhancing working conditions.

Some may argue that this legislation could hinder economic development. However, we believe that by promoting cleaner industries and technologies, the CHERISH Our Communities Act will drive innovation and create new economic opportunities. It will encourage businesses to adopt more sustainable practices, which can lead to long-term cost savings, improved competitiveness, and ultimately, safer and healthier workplaces and thriving communities.

We, the undersigned, lead the Johns Hopkins Education and Research Center, which is funded by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to provide education and training for the next generation of occupational health professionals and researchers. In addition, we each conduct research in exposure assessment, including environmental measurements of chemicals in occupational settings, in community air and water, and biological measurements of chemicals in workers and



residents. Many of us also contribute our expertise to epidemiologic studies investigating the health risks of exposure to chemical mixtures for workers and community members.

Workers face disproportionate risks from chemical exposures, with potential consequences extending beyond the workplace. Their exposure levels often far exceed those of the general public, and they may inadvertently carry hazardous substances home on their clothing, endangering family members. For those living near their workplaces, this creates a compounded threat of continuous exposure both at work and at home, amplifying health risks significantly.

Every year for the past 20+ years we have taught a class that introduces students to Baltimore's industrial past and present, and the occupational safety and health programs that workplaces implement to keep workers safe. As part of this class, we visit several workplaces in the Baltimore region, where it's impossible not to notice that some areas of the city are particularly impacted by a higher number of industrial sites than the rest of the city. We believe this bill represents an important path forward to limit additional burden on the same communities.

Drs. Koehler, Quirós-Alcalá, and Rule are also members of the JHU Bridging Research, Lung Health & the Environment (BREATHE) Center. As members of the JHU BREATHE Center, our extensive research conclusively demonstrates that air pollution, particularly PM2.5 and combustion-related pollutants like NO2, severely impacts vulnerable populations, especially children and older adults with respiratory conditions. In Baltimore, where industrial emissions are prevalent, childhood asthma rates are more than double the national average. This epidemic not only hinders children's education but also strains the healthcare system, with child asthma hospitalizations costing over \$3.5 million annually in Baltimore alone, primarily affecting Medicaid recipients. The stark disparities in asthma prevalence and severity within Baltimore and across Maryland underscore the critical role of environmental factors in chronic respiratory diseases. Our findings, aligned with global evidence, emphasize the urgent need for stringent environmental protections to safeguard public health and reduce healthcare burdens.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act aligns with Maryland's commitment to environmental stewardship, social equity, and worker protection. By supporting this bill, you will be taking a stand for the health and well-being of countless Marylanders who have long suffered from the cumulative effects of environmental pollution, both at home and in the workplace. We urge you to give SB978 a favorable vote. Thank you for your consideration.

Musein Kiehler

Kirsten Koehler, PhD Professor and Director of the Occupational and Environmental Hygiene Program Education and Research Center Department of Environmental Health and Engineering Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Gurumurthy Ramachandran, Ph.D., CIH Professor and Director, The Johns Hopkins Education and Research Center for Occupational Safety and Health Department of Environmental Health and Engineering Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health



Aura Ma. Ruly

Ana Maria Rule, PhD, MHS Assistant Professor, Director of the Pilot Research Program of the ERC Center Department of Environmental Health and Engineering Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

mistagler D. Henry

Christopher D. Heaney, PhD, MS Associate Professor, Director of the Occupational Epidemiology and Biomarkers Program of the ERC Center Department of Environmental Health and Engineering Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Lesliam Quirós-Alcalá, PhD, MS Assistant Professor Department of Environmental Health and Engineering Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health