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February 7, 2025

Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: **FAVORABLE** – SB250 – Department of the Environment – Fees, Penalties, Funding and Regulation

Dear Chairman Feldman and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), I write in support of SB250. I serve as Chair of the Maryland Lead Poisoning Prevention Commission and as a member of the EPA Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee, the CDC Lead Exposure and Prevention Advisory Committee and the Maryland Green and Healthy Homes Task Force. GHHI is dedicated to addressing the social determinants of health and advancing racial and health equity through the creation of healthy, lead safe and energy efficient homes. GHHI has been at the frontline of lead poisoning prevention and holistic healthy housing for over three decades.

Over its 30-year history, GHHI has developed the holistic energy efficiency, health and housing service delivery model that is implemented in our nationally recognized, Maryland-based direct service program. The model was adopted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and is currently being advanced in partner jurisdictions nationally. In addition, GHHI helped to elevate Maryland as a national leader in healthy housing by helping reduce childhood lead poisoning by 99% in the state and helping design over 49 pieces of healthy housing legislation that became law in the State of Maryland and local jurisdictions. By delivering a standard of excellence, GHHI aims to eradicate the negative health impacts of unhealthy housing and unjust policies to ensure better health, economic, and social outcomes for children, seniors and families with an emphasis on Black and Brown low-income communities. GHHI's holistic intervention approach was recently cited by EPA and HUD as a model for effective coordination of federal healthy homes and weatherization programs and resources.

We are deeply committed in our mission to advance racial and health equity, economic mobility and climate resiliency through healthy and energy efficient low-income homes. By increasing state resources for lead poisoning prevention programs and stronger MDE enforcement through SB250, resources can be targeted to improve compliance oversight, improve housing conditions, and reduce legacy pollution and lead poisoning in historically underserved and under-resourced communities in Maryland.



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Impact of Hazardous Housing in Maryland - Lead Poisoning

In 2021, there were 1,430 children with elevated blood levels (EBLs) of 5 µg/dl or higher in Maryland. Lead poisoning from primarily lead in paint, dust and contaminated soil contributes to significant learning disabilities, loss of IQ, speech development problems, attention deficit disorder, poor school performance and violent, aggressive behavior that heavily burdens low-income communities. Lead poisoning directly contributes to the cycle of learning disabilities, poor school performance, steep school dropout rates and juvenile delinquency that prevent low-income children in particular in Maryland from being able to thrive and which burdens the State through increased special education and criminal justice costs. Children poisoned by lead are 7 times more likely to drop out of school and 6 times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system.

In 2012, CDC determined that there was no safe level of lead in a child's body and lowered the blood lead reference level from 10 µg/dl to 5 µg/dl for children. Maryland lowered its blood lead reference level to 5 µg/dl to conform with the CDC. HB1233, the Maryland Healthy Children Act, was passed in 2019 and established that Maryland would align its blood lead standards with any revisions to the CDC's blood reference level within one year. On October 28, 2021, the CDC reviewed all the available blood lead data in the United States and the scientific research and lowered the blood lead reference level accordingly to 3.5 µg/dl. The State of Maryland adopted the 3.5 µg/dl blood lead reference level and lowered the blood lead level for case management in 2022 and lowered the blood lead action level for environmental investigation effective on January 1, 2024.

Increased Funding for MDE Compliance Oversight and Enforcement Capacity

MDE must have the adequate inspection, administrative oversight and enforcement personnel to effectively implement the Maryland Reduction of Lead Risk in Housing Law and to respond to the environmental investigation and lead case management demands from the lowering fully of the blood lead action levels in Maryland to 3.5 µg/dl on January 1, 2024. Minority populations in Maryland are disproportionately impacted by the lead hazardous conditions that exist in their older communities and are most vulnerable to non-compliant homes where deferred maintenance and unsafe housing conditions have created toxic environments. Maryland must continue to remediate lead hazards in our holder housing stock and insure that rental property owners maintain safe, lead certified properties that prevent exposure to lead paint and dust. SB250 will increase funding for MDE staff that will help improve property registration and lead inspection certification compliance rates in the state and expand the staffing capacity to respond to homes where children with elevated blood lead levels have been identified. Additional MDE funding is necessary for ongoing lead safe work practices oversight of lead hazard reduction projects in affected rental properties under the Maryland lead law. While GHHI supports the substantial public and private investments in climate mitigation housing interventions, (greenhouse gas reduction), those weatherization and electrification interventions may also disturb lead-based paint in pre-1978 properties and MDE will play an important role in helping contractors and owners utilize lead safe work practices for such projects in the coming years. Increased revenue

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for MDE is necessary to maintain existing staff, attract new staff and retain Lead Program staff in the coming years through the offering of competitive salaries and benefits.


Lead Poisoning Prevention Program Services

As part of the state’s lead poisoning prevention strategies and as mandated by the legislature, the Maryland Department of the Environment provided funding from 1997-2021 for tenant’s rights assistance, case management, legal services, rental property owner compliance assistance, tenants’ rights and rental property owner compliance trainings, and lead poisoning prevention outreach and education throughout the state. That MDE funding had ceased from July 2021 through October 2024 despite the statutory requirement that at least \$750,000 in funding from the Maryland Lead Poisoning Prevention Fund is spent on lead prevention outreach and education programs and enforcement efforts.

Direct funding for in-home prevention services, training and outreach, interagency coordination, and public and private partnership engagement and coordination has been instrumental in helping the State of Maryland achieve its 99% reduction in childhood lead poisoning since 1993. To maintain that progress and achieve the state’s goal of the elimination of lead poisoning, funding must be sustained for these critical prevention services that complement and supplement MDE’s existing staffing resources. Rental property owner registration fees are an important, sustainable source of funding support through the Maryland Lead Poisoning Prevention Fund at MDE for the direct prevention services that are needed for tenants, parents and rental property owners statewide and in our most at-risk communities.

SB250 will generate important funding to meet the staffing capacity needs of the Maryland Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at MDE, improve rental property owner compliance rates, and support the vital lead poisoning prevention direct services that are needed in Maryland. We ask for a Favorable Report on SB250.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Ruth Ann Norton
President and CEO