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Esteemed members of the Senate Education Energy & Environment Committee,

My name is Zack Buster, and I am writing on behalf of the community nonprofit initiative Environmental Justice Maryland to urgently request a **FAVORABLE** committee report for the **CHERISH Our Communities Act of 2025**. (SB-978/HB-1484) Across the state, corporations have been allowed to pollute our communities without tangible accountability to the people they harm. This bill would change that and ensure a future where Marylanders have a direct say in decisions that directly impact their health.

SB-978 would accomplish this by ensuring communities are consulted in the permitting process for most pollution-generating facilities. In these community hearings, residents can speak out and experts can evaluate the impact of these environmental hazards. With the voice of the people heard, this bill would also empower the Department of Environment to act on this information, allowing the state to deny a permit if a facility would significantly impact the health and wellbeing of these communities.

In many cases, the Department of Environment has their hands tied when protecting underserved communities overburdened by injustice. This bill would change that and allow the state to directly address these issues in a way we currently can't. We cannot prioritize our health and wellbeing without prioritizing environmental justice. We cannot prioritize environmental justice if we do not empower communities to fight against injustice. If this bill passes, we could truly say that we are putting profits before people. Until then, we will never make progress in ensuring environmental justice for every Marylander.

In conclusion, the CHERISH Our Communities Act would allow the state to begin correcting a long legacy of environmental injustice, help the state to enforce existing laws, and empower communities to have a say in the permitting process of new facilities that would impact public health and raise concerns around environmental injustice. It is for these reasons that Environmental Justice Maryland respectfully requests a favorable committee report on SB-978.