

Chair and Committee Members;

My name is Amber Merrell and I am a resident of Montgomery County and I write with both celebrations and concerns over HB1532.

Reducing the EmPOWER greenhouse gas reduction goal from 2.5% to 1.75% effectively reduces the spending and thus reduces or cuts EmPOWER programs. And though this drop is temporary, it is currently planned to take 10 years to get back up to 2.5%. The fact that this is being proposed under the guise of reducing utility bills is absurd. EmPOWER programs directly save households on their utility bills through weatherization and insulation, appliance upgrades, HVAC tuning, and smart thermostats. EmPOWER also lowers household utility bills indirectly by increasing energy efficiency in both residential and commercial customers, which reduces the load demand, which reduces utility bills.

Knowing that EmPOWER increases our energy efficiency and reduces our utility bills, I can only conclude that the effort to lower or remove the EmPOWER surcharge on my utility bill is a political stunt rather than a solution to a major problem. You are paying lip service to the plight of ratepayers without addressing the actual issues of monopolistic utility greed, PJM energy transmission, and our lack of onsite and in-state renewable energy generation. The House and Senate are either not paying attention or you're more influenced by the utilities than you are by your own constituents.

In the more extreme temperatures, my gas and electric bills total around \$500 for a single month. I personally know others with monthly bills that total \$600, \$800, and even \$1000 for a single month. Reducing or removing a \$15-20 EmPOWER surcharge is not a solution. I cannot explain in words the immense frustration and insult it is to be told by state legislators that \$150 annual savings is a lot for some families. \$150 is one week of groceries for my family of two. That's not a solution. Come to my friends' and neighbors' houses who are picking which bills to pay each month despite working full-time jobs and whose children have asthma due to improperly vented gas stoves. Come to their houses and tell them that \$150 is the solution they've been waiting for. Tell them that the state legislatures have been working hard in Annapolis and \$150 is what they decided was best.

We have a utility affordability problem and it has nothing to do with EmPOWER surcharges. The actual problem is the record profits of our monopoly utilities. The problem is our reliance on PJM interstate energy transmission. The solution is giving the Public Service Commission (PSC) the authority and directive to hold the monopoly utilities in check. The utilities right now are asking the PSC for rate increases. And your solution is to cut EmPOWER? It makes no sense. The Strategic Energy Investment Fund (SEIF) is used for utility bill assistance, energy efficiency, and renewable energy generation. EmPOWER is

used to increase energy efficiency. Using these funds, as intended, for energy efficiency upgrades can save households up to \$1000 or even \$2000 EVERY YEAR on utility bills, all while coming closer to state climate and decarbonization goals. But instead of expanding or even keeping these programs safe, you are instead proposing that we send \$292 million of SEIF money to the General Fund and spend another \$100 million to fund this reduction in the EmPOWER surcharge. Money that could actually save ratepayers a meaningful amount of money, wasted.

And I've heard the argument that it's mostly wealthy families who take advantage of EmPOWER programs. First of all, that's an outreach and engagement problem, not a sign of a bad program. Secondly, if wealthy families are using EmPOWER then why on earth would we reduce their EmPOWER surcharges? Let them continue to pay into and take advantage of the program. Meanwhile, use SEIF to give additional assistance to those who need it. These untargeted rebates and surcharge reductions are not helpful. Spend more on helping the families that actually need assistance. Yes, utilities are way too expensive for everyone, but there are plenty of Maryland households that either won't notice or won't care about \$150 savings and others who are more than happy to be contributing to a worthwhile EmPOWER program. Focus efforts on what actually makes a lasting change: improving energy efficiency, supporting renewable energy generation, and empowering and directing the PSC to stop utility greed.

People want to breathe clean air through the replacement of gas stoves with induction stoves. People want to save \$1500 a year through energy upgrades, 10 times the \$150 on the table today. All this while reducing the demand on the grid and bringing us closer to our climate goals. And where's the money for these conversions? The hundreds of millions of dollars being removed from SEIF. SEIF and EmPOWER have the ability to make lasting change to our living conditions, air quality, and utility bills. But instead of supporting these programs, you want to cut a \$15 surcharge that saves an average of \$2.2 per \$1 spent. That's not a solution. It's not even a bandaid. It's an insult. And I don't say that lightly. I say that after watching my neighbors, my friends, my fellow community organizers, go from excited and determined to sad and angry as our representatives show time and again how little you understand the lives of average Marylanders, the very people you supposedly represent.

I hear the budget is all about compromise. But this isn't compromise, it's failure.

Despite my frustration, there are a lot of good things in HB1532. I filed these comments under 'favorable with amendments'. My amendments can be seen in the above comments, as well as the summary list below. The positives that I am excited for are also below.

Positives that should be maintained or strengthened:

- Prohibiting multi-year rate plans
- Capping the amount utilities can charge customers for executive pay
- Improving utility cost transparency
- Removing barriers to rooftop solar and residential battery storage
- Requiring data centers to pay for the needed grid upgrades

Items that should be changed:

- Please do not reduce the EmPOWER goal from 2.5% to 1.75%. At the very least, please do not take 10 years to return to 2.5%.
- Please do not use SEIF to fund EmPOWER. Please keep the EmPOWER surcharge and use the SEIF money to invest in energy savings upgrades for low and moderate income households.

I know that a lot of energy and work has gone into HB1532, and I appreciate the efforts and good intent that many have shown. But I also want the best version of this bill to pass, one that saves ratepayers meaningful amounts of money every year through energy upgrades, not one-time measures that are too little to affect a household budget. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Amber Merrell
Montgomery County Resident