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Education, Energy, and the
Environment Committee
Energy Subcommittee

Chair, Joint Electric Universal
Service Program Workgroup



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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 781
Environmental Permits – Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and
Renewal, and Public Participation
(Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health
– CHERISH our Communities Act)

Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
March 3, 2026

Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on SB 781, CHERISH our Communities Act. This legislation represents a comprehensive and necessary step forward in strengthening environmental justice protections within Maryland's permitting framework.

For decades, environmental and public health burdens have not been distributed equally. Certain communities, particularly overburdened and underserved areas, have experienced a disproportionate concentration of industrial facilities, transportation corridors, waste operations, and other pollution-generating activities. These cumulative impacts affect air quality, water quality, land use, public health outcomes, and overall quality of life.

While Maryland has made meaningful progress in recognizing environmental justice concerns, gaps remain within the State's environmental permitting structure. Existing law often evaluates permits individually, without fully accounting for cumulative impacts or the historical concentration of environmental hazards within a particular community. As a result, residents in already overburdened areas may continue to experience incremental increases in pollution and associated health risks.

The CHERISH Act addresses this structural challenge by modernizing how environmental permits are reviewed and issued. The legislation strengthens requirements for environmental justice analysis, enhances transparency in the permitting process, and ensures that cumulative impacts are meaningfully considered before additional burdens are placed on vulnerable communities.

The need for this legislation is grounded in several realities:

- **Cumulative Impacts:** Traditional permit reviews often assess compliance in isolation. However, communities experience pollution collectively. The combined effect of multiple facilities can significantly exceed what any single permit evaluation might reveal.
- **Public Health Concerns:** Environmental exposure is directly linked to asthma rates, cardiovascular disease, developmental challenges, and other adverse health outcomes. Overburdened communities frequently report higher rates of these conditions.
- **Community Engagement Gaps:** Residents in impacted areas often lack adequate notice, access to information, or meaningful opportunity to participate in permitting decisions that affect their neighborhoods.
- **Long-Term Economic and Environmental Costs:** Environmental degradation carries downstream costs: healthcare expenditures, reduced property values, infrastructure strain, and climate vulnerability, that ultimately affect the entire State.

SB 781 strengthens Maryland's commitment to environmental equity by requiring a more holistic, data-informed, and community-centered approach to permitting decisions. Importantly, the bill does not prevent economic development that benefits overburdened communities. It allows projects to move forward when they serve a compelling public interest and does not affect businesses or activities that do not require the specific pollution permits addressed in the bill.

This legislation reflects a proactive approach. Instead of responding after harm has occurred, the CHERISH Act embeds preventative review mechanisms into the front end of the permitting process. By doing so, Maryland can reduce avoidable health disparities, protect environmental resources, and promote more balanced economic development.

Environmental justice is not solely an environmental issue, it is a public health issue, an economic issue, and a civil rights issue. SB 781 aligns Maryland's regulatory structure with these principles and affirms that no community should bear a disproportionate share of environmental harm.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 781.

With kindest regards,



Benjamin Brooks