

Testimony Supporting SB0781
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
March 3, 2026



Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

As a resident of Wicomico County, and a resident concerned about environmental justice in our rural community, I am writing to express my strong support of SB0781, the CHERISH Our Communities Act applying to MDE-issued permits.

This bill incorporates consideration of cumulative impacts into Maryland's process of issuing permits to pollute, based on laws already passed in New Jersey, Minnesota, and New York. New Jersey's bill has already gone into implementation and won against a legal challenge from polluting industry interests. It is targeted in scope: it will apply to a specific list of types of permits, mostly air pollution permits, water pollution permits for a narrow list of types of industries, and waste disposal permits. **Currently, nearby communities have no opportunity to give public comment on several types of permits to pollute, including more than half of air pollution permits.** The CHERISH Our Communities Act will ensure public participation in the process and fix this longstanding environmental injustice. As a neighbor to concentrated animal feeding operations and the polluting infrastructure associated with them, I understand firsthand what it's like to be unable to walk outside of my home without gagging. Members of my family have asthma, which is exacerbated when stench from this pollution invades our home and property – it's important to me that our voices are heard before *more* polluting industries are sited in our community.

This bill prevents new polluters from being built in environmental justice communities if the Maryland Department of the Environment determines, through a deliberative public process with public input, that allowing it to be built would contribute to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on the nearby community. It also will reduce pollution from existing facilities when their permits are being renewed, if MDE determines that facility is contributing to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on the nearby community.

On behalf of eastern shore communities, I urge you to support SB0781, ensuring public participation in rural communities like mine, and moving forward to protect the health and well-being of Marylanders.

Respectfully submitted,

Rachel Casteel

Sentinels of Eastern Shore Health (SESH)