

Testimony Supporting SB0781 & SB0780
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
March 3, 2026

Position: SUPPORT / FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record in support of SB0781 and SB0780—the CHERISH Our Communities Act. We are Baltimore City residents and environmental health practitioners in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Matthew Aubourg (co-signer) is also a board member of the South Baltimore Community Land Trust (SBCLT). **We write to you in strong support of SB0781 and SB0780—the CHERISH Our Communities Act.**

In our roles as environmental justice researchers and advocates, we have the unique privilege and blessing of seeing what love for one’s community looks like, even amidst the threat of cumulative impacts. The residents, youth, organizers, and community scientists we work alongside and learn from live at the frontline of day-to-day and multi-generational impacts of environmental pollution from various industrial activities, and the compounding effects of structural barriers to even basic needs for achieving a full state of health.¹

The CHERISH Act is community-led legislation rooted in environmental justice here in Maryland to protect frontline communities from cumulative harms of pollution. This bill:

1) Translates community testimony directly into responsive regulatory action.

From the neighboring communities of industrial poultry production in the Eastern Shore of Maryland, to the residents at the frontline of a myriad of stationary and mobile industrial polluters in South Baltimore, and beyond in our state, residents in fence-line communities have reported the health and quality of life impacts of pollution for decades.²⁻⁸ The CHERISH Act is targeted in its geography, applying only to communities overburdened by environmental pollution and compounding non-chemical stressors using the MDEnviroscreen EJ Score.⁹ The CHERISH Act also ensures residents in these communities can comment on a specific list of environmental permits through a defined, public process. Currently, there are several

permit types that residents cannot provide any input on, even though that permit may be allowing pollution to occur in their own backyard.

2) Is aligned with the state of public and environmental health science.

The science is clear and unequivocal: air, water, and land pollution are core drivers of community and individual-level mortality and morbidity, which amplify or are amplified by socioeconomic and structural harms.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ Air pollution and heavy metal contamination, for instance, have been linked to increased cancer risk, neurodevelopmental and psychosocial harms, and respiratory and cardiovascular disease.^{12,16-20} Both these environmental exposures and structural burdens are borne disproportionately in communities of color and communities with lower wealth. As aforementioned, impacted community lived experience has described this for decades and the science is meeting this understanding of how environmental exposures interact with non-chemical stressors.

3) Is informed by the state of environmental regulatory practice as demonstrated in multiple other states and jurisdictions.

The current permitting regime in Maryland permits individual facilities without any consideration of that facility's contribution to the combined impacts of multiple polluters in a single area. By and large, these areas are communities of color and communities of lower wealth due to the entrenched histories of redlining and inequitable zoning and land use practices. Multiple states and city-level jurisdictions around the United States (e.g., New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Chicago) have passed and implemented cumulative impacts legislation to meet the on-the-ground and scientifically-informed realities of pollution. In New Jersey, for example, their Environmental Justice Law on cumulative impacts is in implementation and has already won against legal challenges from polluting industry interests. There is already a clear track record nationally of implementing legislation to better protect impacted communities, codify environmental justice commitments (i.e., Gov. Wes Moore signing Valuing Opportunity, Inclusion, and Community Equity [VOICE] Executive Order in 2025)^{21,22}, and hold polluters accountable.

The CHERISH Act 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.

Maryland has a critical opportunity to be a champion for environmental justice, particularly in a national landscape when champions are needed more than ever. Thank you again for this opportunity and we urge a favorable report on **SB0781 & SB0780–the CHERISH Act.**

Sincerely,

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