

TESTIMONY OF
LAUREN GREACEN GYGAX
MARYLAND PROGRAM ASSOCIATE

TESTIMONY OF
BRITTANY BAKER
MARYLAND DIRECTOR

MIKE TIDWELL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



**SB0781 - Environmental Permits-Requirement for Burden Analysis, Issuance and
Renewal, and Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for
Improving Shared Health - CHERISH Our Communities Act)**

FAVORABLE

Education, Energy, and the Environment
February 27, 2026

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee,

This legislation is critical for Maryland to protect communities of color that are often already faced with greater proximity to sources of pollution, from further environmental injustices.

Historically, racist redlining and land-use policies systematically divested from and discriminated against communities of color. Communities of color were targeted for polluting facilities such as industrial sites, mining operations, hazardous waste landfills, and concentrated animal feeding operations.¹ Black and Brown people have also historically carried the burden of the fossil fuel energy system and continue to bear the brunt of this today.² People of color make up 42% of the U.S. population, but represent 57% of those living in counties with unhealthy levels of air pollution.³ Low-income, Black, and other communities of color in Maryland face greater cancer risks and exposure to air toxins.⁴ It is essential that Maryland focuses on addressing these environmental and public health harms.

In recent years Maryland legislators have been working to advance reparative justice. For example progress has been made on identifying environmental justice communities through the MD EJ screening tool. But this work needs to go further than just identifying these underserved and overburdened communities. MDE and PSC need to have the authority to reject permits if there is an environmental justice concern.

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10568515/>

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41560-022-01162-y>

³ <https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/sustainability-indicators/environmental-justice-factsheet>

⁴ https://cleanwater.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/CHERISH%20Act%202025%20Factsheet_English.pdf

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The CHERISH Act would advance environmental justice by setting new requirements for pollution permits in environmental justice communities to ensure that communities that are already overburdened with sources of pollution are protected from additional harm. The bill would fill in the gaps of Maryland’s current permit process by allowing public participation in the process. It would also prevent new polluters from being located in environmental justice communities if the Maryland Department of the Environment determines, through a deliberative process, that the project would contribute to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on the nearby community. The bill is targeted in scope to permits that specifically create air pollution, water pollution, and waste disposal. This legislation builds off of existing laws passed in New Jersey, Minnesota and New York. The CHERISH act is critical solution for addressing the inequities in communities suffering from pollution

I urge the favorable passing of SB0781.