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March 3, 2026

**Support: 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)**

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee:

Maryland LCV is submitting this testimony to strongly support SB 781, The CHERISH Our Communities Act. We thank Senator Brooks for introducing this important bill as well as its companion SB 780, and for his leadership on this issue. The CHERISH Our Communities Act is a top priority bill for Maryland LCV, as well as a priority bill for the environmental community.

Environmental justice is rooted in the principles that all communities deserve a clean and healthy environment, and those most affected have a voice in the decisions shaping their future. These principles are reflected in SB 781, which builds on years of community-driven efforts to assess the cumulative impacts of pollution. This bill addresses gaps in the Maryland Department of the Environment's (MDE) permitting authority to protect the health and well-being of communities.

SB 781 seeks protections for overburdened and underserved communities, authorizing additional scrutiny for certain permits when they are proposed in these communities, as well as the authority for the agency to use environmental justice and cumulative impacts information to make a decision about a permit. It also adds public participation on several permit types that currently do not include robust community notice or outreach.

SB 781 takes the commonsense step of requiring an applicant to submit a Baseline Understanding of Risk, Disparities, and Environmental Needs (BURDEN) Report for certain polluting facilities proposed in at-risk areas, defined in the bill language. The results of the BURDEN Report would factor into the permit decision. At-risk census tracts are among the most polluted and underserved in the state, making it critical that permits in these communities undergo additional screening. This approach ensures that the health and well-being of residents are prioritized and that the state fulfills its commitment to environmental justice.

The coalition supporting this bill has worked diligently with MDE for many months to come to an agreement on bill language that makes significant progress improving community health and public participation in permitting, while cognizant of the fiscal constraints Maryland faces this year. We are supportive of the sponsor package of amendments being presented at the hearing.

The first cumulative impacts bill was proposed in Maryland in 2014. Since that time, Maryland has made some progress, including the development of the state's EJ mapping tool, now MDEnviroScreen, and requiring that some environmental justice information be included in certain types of permit applications. But we have fallen behind other states including New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Minnesota in implementing comprehensive and meaningful cumulative impacts laws.

We want to bring your attention to 17 pieces of testimony from Environmental Justice and Action Promotores of Maryland LCV's Chispa Maryland program in support of this bill. They're joining many other Chispa community members in advocating for the CHERISH Act. Chispa's Promotores are community volunteers who work tirelessly alongside families in their communities to advance environmental justice. They advocate for healthy communities and a clean environment where their families can thrive and their children can reach their full potential.

Maryland LCV strongly urges a favorable report on this important bill, and its companion that addresses permits at the PSC.