

Testimony on HB1532 – Favorable with Amendments

HB1532 – Utility RELIEF (Reducing Energy Load Inflation for Everyday Families) Act

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 25, 2026

Dear Honorable Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Gita Lefstein, and I am a resident of Baltimore County, Maryland. I am writing with mixed reactions to HB1532, the Utility RELIEF Act.

There is certainly a huge need for relief from the soaring costs of energy, and this bill takes some positive steps in that regard, but unfortunately, they are baby steps. It does not go far enough. It also takes some steps backwards.

Clean energy is cheaper, faster to build, and healthier for the planet as a whole and for people. This bill does include the part of SB0341/HB0345 (the Affordable Solar Act) which deals with plug in solar (also known as balcony solar), and that is good. However, in the Affordable Solar Act, plug in solar was permitted up to 1200 watts. In the Utility RELIEF Act, it is only permitted up to 391 watts per electric meter. There needs to be an amendment to increase the amount permitted to 1200 watts. And the rest of the Affordable Solar Act needs to be included.

The Utility RELIEF Act requires localities to make the process for residential rooftop solar permitting easier and quicker. The state legislature had passed similar requirements previously in the Brighter Tomorrow Act with a deadline of August of this year. Unfortunately, many counties, including the one I live in, did not comply. The Utility RELIEF Act puts a new deadline in 2027, with some compliance requirement. That is a positive.

On transmission lines, the Utility RELIEF Act includes requirements for more transparency, as well as consideration of better technology, and other alternatives. This is a definite positive.

On data centers, the Utility RELIEF Act has some important transparency requirements which should help prevent the same data center from being counted in multiple places, one of the problems which has caused the PJM capacity market prices to skyrocket. The bill encourages data centers to bring their own energy sources, but does not require it. Amendments are needed to require data centers to bring their own new and clean energy sources with battery backup, not diesel generator backup; to require community input into all aspects of data center development in a given community; to require that data centers not be built in areas that are

already overburdened with polluting industries; and to provide tax benefits to the state and counties.

Finally, I am very concerned about the backward steps the Utility RELIEF Act takes. This bill takes some money from the EMPOWER program and uses it for customer rebates. The EMPOWER program is designed to increase energy efficiency, which decreases demand. Decreased demand means prices would go down, so strictly from a supply and demand point of view, reducing the EMPOWER program is a short-sighted plan. But more importantly, less demand for electricity means there would be less use of fossil fuels which are the direct cause of climate change. The bill reduces the targets for greenhouse gas emissions for each electric company. Starting in 2027, the targets were supposed to be a 2.5% reduction of greenhouse gases annually. This bill changes the targets to 1.75% for 2027 through 2029, 2% for 2030 through 2032, and 2.25% for 2033 through 2035, not returning to 2.5% until 2036. That's a decade from now. Anybody who follows the science around climate change knows that we are in a race against time and that we need to drastically reduce greenhouse gases now. Reducing the targets and pushing back the deadlines is not acceptable.

Likewise, the SEIF, the Strategic Energy Investment Fund, is being raided (for the second year) for budget relief. Much of the money in the SEIF comes from utilities choosing to make alternative compliance payments because they are not meeting the goals for clean energy. That money needs to be used to promote clean energy for the same reasons that the EMPOWER money needs to be used to increase energy efficiency. The budget is definitely a problem, but diverting money from the SEIF for that purpose is just increasing tomorrow's problems.

Amendments need to be added to the Utility RELIEF Act to delete the portions of this bill that take funds from the EMPOWER program and the SEIF for other purposes and to restore the greenhouse gas targets.

Thank you.