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February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Senator Brian J. Feldman,  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
11 Bladen Street Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: FAVORABLE – SB0781 – Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and Renewal, and Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health - CHERISH Our Communities Act)**

Dear Chairman Feldman and members of the committee,

On behalf of the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), I submit for the record our comments on Senate Bill 781. GHHI is a 501(c)(3) national nonprofit organization headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland. Our mission is to address the social determinants of health, opportunity and racial and health equity through the creation of healthy, safe and climate resilient homes.

GHHI is the nation's lead authority on the benefits of a whole-house approach that aligns, braids and coordinates energy efficiency, health and safety to create an integrated home repair and retrofit delivery model to improve health, economic and social outcomes in line with the state's climate goals. GHHI's work has been recognized through national best practice awards from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and HUD and the GHHI model has been supported by the US Department of Energy (DOE) and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as well as numerous states, cities and counties throughout the US. By delivering a standard of excellence, GHHI's work aims to eradicate the negative impact of historic disinvestment, the legacy of ill-conceived and unjust housing by creating holistically healthy housing for children, seniors and families in Maryland's low wealth communities.

As president and chief executive officer of GHHI, I direct GHHI's national strategy as well as serve as a member of the EPA Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee (CHPAC), the National Council of State Housing Agencies' National Advisory Group, the American Public Health Association (APHA) Environmental Leadership Network, and chair the board of Healthy Climate Maryland coalition, among others.

GHHI supports passage of the CHERISH Our Communities Act because it strengthens Maryland's environmental protection framework by requiring cumulative impact analysis and ensuring that communities already facing disproportionate pollution burdens are not subjected to additional harm without meaningful safeguards.

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### **Cumulative Pollution Impacts on Housing and Community Health**

SB781 strengthens Maryland’s environmental justice framework by ensuring that the Maryland Department of the Environment can incorporate Existing Burden Report findings into permitting decisions when certain facilities are proposed in communities with an Environmental Justice score of 75 or higher. These are the same communities GHHI serves every day. They are neighborhoods where residents already contend with aging housing stock, high energy burdens, and elevated exposure to environmental hazards. When permitting decisions fail to account for cumulative impacts, additional pollution does not occur in a vacuum. It compounds existing risks and directly affects the health and stability of families living in those homes.

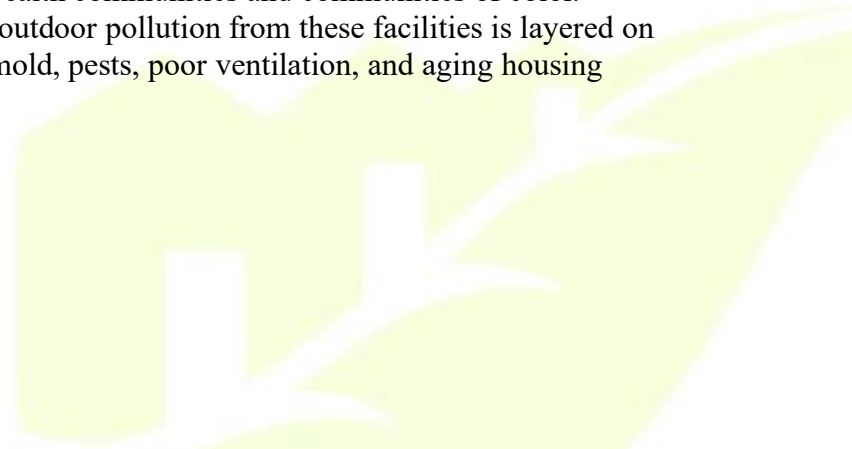
For GHHI, this connection between environmental exposure and healthy living is not theoretical. As an organization working at the intersection of housing, health, and energy, we see how substandard housing conditions and external pollution pressures interact to drive up medical costs, missed school days, lost work hours, and housing instability. Through our whole house approach, we address multiple health and safety risks at once, including indoor air quality, energy inefficiency, structural hazards, and toxic exposures. Studies conducted for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Baltimore demonstrate measurable outcomes from this work:

- 66 percent reduction in asthma related hospitalizations
- 30 percent reduction in asthma related emergency room visits
- 62 percent increase in school attendance due to fewer asthma related absences
- 88 percent increase in parental work attendance linked to improved child health
- 99 percent reduction in childhood lead poisoning
- Reductions in household injuries for children and trip and fall injuries for seniors
- Increased mobility and accessibility allowing older adults to age in place safely

The CHERISH Act is the structural solution to this disconnect. GHHI’s work proves that reducing environmental hazards improves health outcomes and lowers public costs. But those gains are fragile if state permitting decisions continue to allow additional pollution in the same communities where we are investing in healthier homes. The CHERISH Act strengthens Maryland’s permitting framework by requiring cumulative impact review and elevating community health considerations before new or expanded facilities are approved.

### **Pollution Burdens Disproportionately Concentrated in Overburdened Communities**

Asthma remains one of the clearest and most preventable indicators of health inequity in Maryland, particularly for children living in communities already burdened by pollution. Respiratory illness does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by cumulative exposure to air toxics from nearby incinerators, fossil fuel facilities, landfills, and heavy industrial sites. Many of which are disproportionately located in low-wealth communities and communities of color. Asthma rates and emergency visits rise when outdoor pollution from these facilities is layered on top of indoor environmental hazards such as mold, pests, poor ventilation, and aging housing stock.



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Each year, Maryland sees more than 20,000 asthma-related emergency department visits and nearly 2,000 asthma-related hospitalizations.<sup>1</sup> Black children experience asthma-related emergency visits at rates several times higher than White children, reflecting persistent racial disparities in exposure and health outcomes. The economic impact is substantial, with tens of millions of dollars spent annually on asthma-related emergency care and hospitalizations in Maryland alone.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, asthma remains one of the leading chronic conditions affecting children and contributes to millions of missed school and workdays each year. These data demonstrate that asthma is not simply a medical condition, it is closely tied to environmental exposure, housing quality, and long-standing inequities that shape community health.

**Summary**

Senate Bill 781 is about making sure Maryland’s environmental policies reflect what communities are already experiencing on the ground. GHHI sees every day how pollution, aging housing, and economic strain overlap in the same neighborhoods. We also see that when environmental risks are reduced, health outcomes improve, families miss fewer days of school and work, and public costs decline. Those gains should not be undermined by permitting decisions that ignore existing pollution burdens.

The CHERISH Act ensures that cumulative impacts are considered before additional facilities are approved in already overburdened communities. It brings transparency, accountability, and a public health lens into the permitting process. By doing so, it helps protect the progress Maryland is making in housing, health, and environmental justice. GHHI respectfully urges the General Assembly to pass Senate Bill 781.

Respectfully Submitted

Signed by:  
  
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Ruth Ann Norton  
President and CEO  
Green & Healthy Homes Initiative

<sup>1</sup> <https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/OEHFP/EH/pages/asthma.aspx> (accessed March 3, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> <https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/OEHFP/EH/pages/asthma.aspx> (accessed March 3, 2026).

