



Testimony Supporting SB 781
Education, Energy, & the Environment Committee
February 27th, 2026
Position: FAVORABLE

Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Interfaith Power & Light (DC.MD.NoVa) working with over a thousand congregations in Maryland, we respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 781, the CHERISH Our Communities Act.

Across Maryland, we see a painful and persistent reality: some communities – often low-income communities and communities of color – live with a disproportionate share of pollution. Families worship, learn, work, and raise children in the shadow of highways, industrial facilities, and incinerators. Yet under Maryland’s current permitting system, state agencies evaluate pollution sources one at a time. They do not meaningfully assess the cumulative impacts of multiple polluters on the health of a community when deciding whether to issue a new, renewed, or expanded permit.

This siloed approach ignores lived experience. Residents do not breathe pollution one permit at a time. They experience it cumulatively, leading to higher asthma rates, heart disease, and missed school days. While the Maryland Department of the Environment has developed new environmental justice mapping tools, it lacks explicit legal authority to use that information to shape permitting decisions. As a result, communities already overburdened by pollution remain vulnerable to additional harm.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act would apply to permit types of greatest concern in overburdened communities and require a robust Environmental Impact Assessment. This assessment would incorporate the Maryland EJ Score for affected census tracts; a description of the proposed permit and its environmental setting; an analysis of short- and long-term public health and environmental impacts; alternatives to the proposed action; mitigation measures; and an Existing Burden Report detailing current pollution levels in impacted communities.

Importantly, the bill ensures that permits cannot simply move forward unchanged in communities already carrying disproportionate burdens. If a project would exacerbate environmental injustice, the permit must be meaningfully altered and include a Community Benefits Agreement, or be denied. This establishes a commonsense guardrail: economic development must not come at the cost of community health and dignity.

As people of faith, we are guided by the moral principle that **every person is worthy of clean air, clean water, and a healthy environment**. We are called to protect the most vulnerable among us and to repair harm where it has been done. Through CHERISH, Maryland has the opportunity to demonstrate that we are committed to environmental justice not just in words, but in law.

We urge you to advance SB 781 and ensure that Maryland’s permitting system truly cherishes our communities by prioritizing public health, transparency, and equity.