

Written Testimony of Keshia M. Pollack Porter, PhD, MPH  
Before the Maryland House of Delegates Economic Matters Committee  
in **STRONG SUPPORT** of  
House Bill 109: Public Service Commission – Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity –  
Rapid Health Impact Assessment and Final Action

February 13, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Davis and members of the Economic Matters Committee. My name is Dr. Keshia Pollack Porter and I am a Professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I am an international expert on the use of health impact assessment or HIA. I teach graduate level courses, have conducted short trainings for professionals, and have been conducting research on or advancing the use of HIA for nearly a decade. I am here today as a public health professional and concerned resident of Maryland. I provide this testimony in my own individual capacity. I am not representing the view or position of the Johns Hopkins University or Bloomberg School of Public Health.

HB 109 requires that a rapid HIA be conducted to inform the Public Service Commission's decision regarding applications. I strongly support this bill and my comments regarding my support center on three points: first, what is a rapid HIA and its potential; second, how a rapid HIA can improve public health for all Marylanders; and third, the potential for a rapid to improve decisions made by the Public Service Commission.

**First**, the conditions in the places where we live, work and play have a tremendous impact on our health. It is much easier to stay healthy when we have clean air, healthy food, and access to affordable housing; and when we are safe from violent crime, fires, and lead poisoning. Every day, policymakers in many sectors have opportunities to make choices that—if they took health into account—could help stem the growth of pressing and costly health problems like obesity, injury, asthma, and diabetes that have such a huge impact on our state's health care costs. Having a robust and healthy economy requires a healthy workforce.

HIA is a tool that helps policymakers take advantage of these opportunities to consider health by bringing together scientific data, health expertise and public input to identify the potential—and often overlooked—health effects of proposed new laws, regulations, projects, and programs. HIAs are conducted to inform a specific decision and they highlight both the positive and negative health impacts. HIA also helps identify communities that may be disproportionately impacted by these decisions by looking at how certain neighborhoods may fare if the decision goes forward as compared to other neighborhoods. HIA gives legislators, public agencies, and other decision-makers the information they need to advance smarter policies today to help build safe, thriving communities tomorrow.

The practice of HIA began in the late 1990s in the U.S. and to date, over 450 HIAs have been conducted or are in progress. Evaluations of many of these HIAs, including evaluations that I have been part of, show that HIAs lead to better decisions for health, strengthen communities, and build transparency and trust.

HB 109 specifies that a rapid HIA be completed within 30 days, which is feasible for this type of analysis. In practice, rapid HIAs typically take a few weeks to complete. There is published guidance on what is required for a study to be considered an HIA and some benchmarks for effective practice, making it easy for people to learn about and conduct a valid rapid HIA.

Rapid HIAs are not costly. My own evaluation research shows that rapid HIAs cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars. I contend that this amount is a nominal fee compared to the project construction fees to the organizations that are applying to the Public Service Commission.

**Second**, rapid HIAs are valuable for public health. Through the graduate level HIA course that I teach, we have conducted rapid analyses of decisions related to crude oil transport, transportation, and natural gas storage. By using a very rapid format, we were able to highlight how the proposed decision could impact factors important to health, such as jobs and drinking water, as well as specific ways to promote the health benefits and reduce the health risks. For example, a rapid HIA required by HB 109 may make recommendations to project worker safety and reduce injury during construction.

**Third**, HB 109 has the potential to help the Public Service Commission make better decisions. Rapid HIAs are not intended to stop an application, rather they would highlight ways that applications should minimize risks and capitalize on opportunities to improve health. This is the essence of HIA – allowing consideration of often overlooked health impacts to factor into the decision-making process. Currently, the potential health impacts of the Public Service Commission’s projects on Maryland residents is not considered when these decisions are made. The current standard process is a missed opportunity to improve public health, and possibly implement recommendations to mitigate risks that could have cost-savings because health was improved and not harmed.

In conclusion, Maryland has an opportunity to join other states across this country that have passed legislation requiring HIA, and to become the very first state that focuses on HIAs for decisions made by the Public Service Commission. Important decisions that impact the quality of our public utility services and related construction projects, and electricity generation. HB 109 makes public health a central part of decision-making for the Public Service Commission, which is something that all Marylanders deserve.