



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

**Senate Bill 710
In the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
Water Utilities Shutoff Protections
Hearing on February 29, 2024
Position: FAVORABLE**

Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) submits its written testimony on SB 710 in response to a request from Senator Mary Washington.

MLA has been representing low-income homeowners in foreclosure, tax sale and other consumer matters for over 100 years. SB 710 would increase the ability for the state and localities to limit water shutoffs in a crisis and would limit the ability for the state and localities to shut off a citizen's water when extenuating circumstances are present. Because SB 710 would prevent water utility shutoffs for low-income homeowners and renters in Maryland, MLA testifies in strong support of SB 710.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines water unaffordability at more than 2 percent of household income¹. The Maryland Advisory Committee to the U.S. Committee on Civil Rights found that “[u]nder this definition, water is unaffordable across the state of Maryland. In fact, for households at 50 percent of the federal poverty rate, water is only affordable in three of the state’s 38 PUMAs (Public Use Microdata Areas)².”

Water and sewer service rates have increased sharply in recent years. The increasing cost is not isolated to Baltimore City, where repair of aging systems drove up rates by 30% between 2019 and 2021 and will continue to push rates by 3% annually from 2022 through 2025³. Facing similar infrastructure and budget needs, WSSC implemented back-to-back rate hikes of over 6% over the past two years in Montgomery County and Prince George’s County⁴. Last year, the private company Maryland Water Service, Inc.’s 3,500 customers faced rate hikes of 30% in Bel Air and Joppa, 68% in Cumberland, and 255% in Severn⁵.

¹ Maryland Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Water Affordability in Maryland* 10 (July 2022), <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2022-07/md-sac-water-affordability.pdf>.

² *Id.*

³ Colin Campbell, “Baltimore water rates will increase 30 percent in next three years,” *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 9, 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-water-rate-hike-20190109-story.html>; Baltimore City Public Works, FY 2023-2025 Water/Sewer/Stormwater Rates.

⁴ Steve Bohnel, “County Council recommends up to 7% increase in WSSC water rates for upcoming year,” *MoCo360*, Nov. 1, 2022, <https://moco360.media/2022/11/01/county-council-recommends-up-to-7-increase-in-wssc-water-rates-for-upcoming-year>.

⁵ Elizabeth Janney, “Proposed Water Rate Hike In Bel Air Prompts Hearing,” *Patch.com*, Feb. 7, 2022, <https://patch.com/maryland/belair/proposed-water-rate-hike-bel-air-prompts-hearing>.

While federal dollars have recently become available for water bill assistance, first through the CARES Act and presently in the form of the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program, localities must anticipate that federal funding will taper off or fail to cover the full extent of need. It will be necessary for localities to innovate long-term affordability mechanisms.

Because SB 710 would limit the situations in which water could be shut off for low-income residents of Maryland, MLA testifies in strong support of SB 710. If you have any further questions, please contact Louise Carwell at (410) 951-7786 or via e-mail at lcarrowell@mdlab.org.

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