



Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore, Inc.

Corporate Office
(410) 327-1200

25 E 20th Street
(410) 675-1855 (fax)

Baltimore, Maryland 21218
www.nhsbaltimore.com

October 26, 2016

Councilman Carl Stokes, Chair
Baltimore City Council Taxation, Finance and Economic Development Committee
100 N. Holliday Street, Suite 400
Baltimore, MD 21202

Re: Testimony in Support of City Council Bill No. 16-0307R
Informational Hearing—Water Affordability

Dear Chairperson and Members of the Baltimore City Council Taxation, Finance and Economic Development Committee;

As a nonprofit leader and co-chair of the Baltimore City Tax Sale Work Group I would like to urge the city council to consider legislation establishing affordability as a criteria for water billing in Baltimore City. As a result of our work providing rehab services and tax sale loans, my staff has had significant interaction with some of the lowest income residents of Baltimore. Recently at an event, a senior approached a staff member and shared that she is grateful that food stamps allow her to purchase bottled water because city water is too expensive for her to afford. Another senior shared how she had joined a local gym because it was less expensive to shower and fill a couple bottles of water each day at the gym than to have city water in her home. Interacting with seniors who struggle every day to stretch very limited income for so many needs highlights the need for an affordability provision within our water billing system.

Another major issue is what happens to a resident when they don't pay their bill. Under our current policies, the water to their property may be shut off but it is unclear how and under what circumstances DPW makes this decision. The water service is then restored once the account is brought current. If the bill is not brought current the property may end up being included in the annual Baltimore City tax sale. This annual event places low income residents at risk of losing their home with no equity returned to them for an unpaid bill as low as \$750. The ensuing trap of tax sale ensnares them into a costly spiral that is extremely difficult to escape. One senior recently told a staff member, "Please help me get out of tax sale so I don't lose my home. I don't need water and I can't afford it." We can do better for our residents. There are two steps that the council can take to help address the rising costs of water. First, create a just system of billing based on affordability. Second, remove water bills from tax sale. These two actions will ensure that the most vulnerable residents of our city are able to have water service in their home.

Thank you to the city council for your consideration of these important issues facing Baltimore. As we work together to craft a better water billing cost structure please consider the affordability for our most vulnerable residents and please remove water bills from tax sale.

Respectfully Submitted;

Sincerely,
Dan Ellis

Executive Director, Neighborhood Housing Services
Co-Chair, Baltimore City Tax Sale Work Group



Ellis
10/26/16