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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF COUNCIL BILL 20-0626
Water Accountability and Equity Act - Modifications

TO: Chair Middleton, Vice Chair McCray, & members of the Taxation, Finance and Economic Development Committee

FROM: Zach Margulies on behalf of Jews United for Justice

My name is Zach Margulies. I am a resident of Baltimore City's 3rd district, and am a member of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ), which organizes more than 1,600 people in the City to support local social, racial, and economic justice issues. **I submit this testimony in support of Council Bill 20-0626 on behalf of myself and JUFJ.**

In March of this year, I threw myself into the work of supporting my neighbors and my community as the pandemic descended upon Baltimore and the world. At the time, I was living in the Abell neighborhood of Charles Village. Fellow neighborhood leaders and I formed a "mutual aid" network to join hands in tackling the overlapping health and economic catastrophes that this virus brought onto our communities. Now, eight months into the crisis, we are a network of more than 150 neighbors and partner with many other community organizations. Every week I talk to neighbors who are struggling to get enough healthy food on the table for their families, many are lost in a sea of unpaid back-rent, a big share of neighbors lost their jobs and can't find work, tons of unemployment checks have dried up, and of course countless cannot afford their utilities. Nevertheless, our mutual aid organization does what it can to support our people. We connect folks with our free weekly food boxes and provide a volunteer to do social/emotional support when needed. And we even host virtual fundraisers to help neighbors pay their bills. But it's never enough. **Everyone is struggling and we are tired.**

Every day my heart aches knowing that I wish I could do more, but I just can't. The stimulus check wasn't enough, rent assistance and other eviction prevention is insufficient, utility assistance is hard to come by, the jobs haven't come back, and we are all terrified of catching and spreading this virus. And now, worst of all, the cases are skyrocketing again. We are being told we have to dig our heels in and be more careful than ever so we can protect our loved ones and our city. But I have to ask - how much deeper can we dig? This hole is so big and **we need your help.**

I can hardly count the number of people who have reached out to us because they need help with utilities and water. I've had multiple neighbors whose utilities have been shut off and they

are facing eviction. I've had neighbors who had to make the impossible decision of choosing between utilities and medication for their grandmother. At one point we had to raise funds for our neighbor whose home was downright unlivable. The house had no running water and we had to bring bottled water for her to use for everything. So I ask you now, what should I tell these residents when they call us to help? What should I say when they don't have enough money to pay their utility bills? What should I tell struggling parents when they can't afford an erroneous water bill? I have tried countless times to connect people to government resources and at the end of the day - **it just isn't enough**. Residents need affordable water and we needed it yesterday. You all have the power to do something right now.

The Jewish tradition teaches that water is life and that housing is crucial. Denying residents either is a denial of human rights. So, I implore you all to please support my neighbors in getting equitable and affordable water. In November of 2019, we won a groundbreaking victory in the passage of The Water Accountability and Equity Act (WAEA), but sadly, it has yet to be implemented. As we prepare to dig our heels in for a long, dark winter, we need all the tools we can get to stay safe and healthy. We need a way to dispute incorrect water bills. People, especially renters, need access to financial assistance to afford water. The passage of ordinance 20-0626 "Water Accountability and Equity Act – Modifications" will provide timeline benchmarks so we can finally implement the WAEA. **I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of this ordinance and help protect our community.**