



21-0007R

**Investigative Hearing – Water Billing System
Hearing Before the Baltimore City Council's Rules and Legislative Oversight Committee
MARCH 25, 2021**

Good afternoon Chairman Schleifer and Honorable members of the Committee. My name is Jade McDuffie McClary and I am a staff attorney in the Home Preservation Project at the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Baltimore City residents we serve each and every day at our various legal clinics.

The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland ("PBRC"), an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is the statewide clearinghouse for pro bono civil legal services in Maryland. As the designated pro bono arm of the Maryland State Bar Association, PBRC provides training, mentorship, and pro bono service opportunities to members of the private bar. Through our utility bill clinics, PBRC and our partner Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS) advocate for low-income Baltimore City residents with utility bill issues, helping to stabilize their finances and preserve home ownership. We also coordinate tax sale prevention clinics, which, prior to recent legislation, prevented copious amounts of residents from losing their homes from overdue water bills.

The City-County Office of the Inspector General's Report on the Department of Public Works released last year confirms that issues with utility bills, especially water bills, are a constant problem for Baltimore City's low-income residents. According to calculations by attorney and economist Roger Colton, the average customer's water bill is expected to rise to \$1,115 by 2022, more than triple the average bill of \$350 in 2010. Beyond the high cost of water service, Baltimore also has a long history of significant problems with water billing errors, as detailed in the very report that brings us here today.

Discount programs for low-income residents remain cumbersome and nearly impossible to access. This is why our clinic uses volunteer attorneys to advise clients of their rights and to assist them in negotiating for payment plans and adjustments to incorrect and inflated meter readings. You should not need a lawyer to get assistance with your water bill, but that that is the reality for Baltimore City residents.

Just last month, our utility bill clinic assisted two clients with astronomically high water bills. One client, who I will call Anna, is a 53-year-old resident of 21211. Anna currently has a \$5,000 water bill. This bill has accumulated over time, as Anna has not been employed since March due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Our volunteer attorney educated Anna about the BH20 Assists Program, and a staff attorney from MVLS is negotiating a payment plan with DPW, although it has taken several weeks and many calls to find the contact person within the Department to begin this process.

The other client, who I will call Ayesha, is a 60-year-old resident of 21201. Ayesha currently has a \$3,000 water bill and, like Anna, is unemployed. Ayesha applied for BH20 assists in November 2020, but her application has yet to be processed and her credit has not been applied to her account. Once her credit is applied, we will be able to negotiate a payment plan for Ayesha.

Unfortunately, we have seen many more issues in our clinics. Some clients do not understand why or how their water bills have skyrocketed. As the OIG's report confirmed, thousands of digital water meters in the City and the County are not fully functional. Like our clients, Anna and Ayesha, the report states that there are more than 8,000 open "tickets" pertaining to County water accounts that have not been addressed by the City to the satisfaction of the County. While the Water Accountability and Equity Act would create a new dispute resolution process through the Office of the Water Customer Advocacy and appeals, more needs to be done, as detailed in this report.

I ask that you continue to work toward implementing the Water Accountability and Equity Act, in addition to fixing problems identified in the OIGs report, such as inaccurate meters and contract management. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify.

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