Sewage Backups in Baltimore Homes

Introduction

Sewage backups are a big problem in Baltimore City. When heavy rain overwhelms Baltimore’s aging pipes, sewage has no place to go but up and out into people’s basement floor drains, toilets, showers, and washing machines. These backups happen thousands of times each year and put residents’ health, homes, and livelihoods at risk.

What’s Causing Sewage Backups in Baltimore?

- Heavy rain and flooding cause large amounts of water to leak into Baltimore’s sewer system - the pipes that were only designed to carry sewage. When the sewer system becomes too full, sewage has nowhere to go other than back up into street-level manholes, or the pipes in people’s homes.
- Baltimore’s sewer system was originally built with structured sewage outfalls, which act as emergency release valves that discharge sewage into local streams when the system is too full.
- Since 2002, Baltimore City has been under a federal order - or Consent Decree - to end all sewage overflows. As the City has worked to close the structured sewage outfalls as part of the Consent Decree, sewage backups into residents’ homes have dramatically increased.
- Blockages in sewer pipes caused by fats, oils, grease, trash, non-flushable wipes, and other items can also cause sewage backups.
How is Baltimore City Addressing Sewage Backups?

Baltimore City has two programs meant to help residents deal with sewage backups, the Expedited Reimbursement Program and the Sewage Onsite Support Cleanup Program.

Expedited Reimbursement Program (ERP)
- In April 2018, Baltimore City’s Department of Public Works (DPW) launched the ERP to help residents with the costs of cleanup for backups that occur from heavy rains.
- Under the ERP, applicants can receive up to $5,000 to reimburse costs for pumping out sewage and disinfecting soiled spaces. Funds cannot be used to cover other costs, such as repairs, property loss, or lost wages.
- The ERP has consistently failed to provide desperately needed relief to residents. In the first two years of the Pilot Program, DPW denied all but 12 applications and only paid out $14,775 (<1%) of the $4 million set aside for reimbursement.

Sewage Onsite Support Cleanup Program
- In March 2021, DPW launched the Sewage Onsite Support (SOS) Cleanup Program to provide residents with direct cleanup assistance for backups that occur from heavy rains.
- The SOS program protects public health by reducing the likelihood that a resident will be forced to clean up raw sewage themselves due to financial constraints.
- An October 2021 feasibility study from DPW clearly shows that the SOS program is helping more people than the ERP: 14 backups were cleaned up through the SOS program between March and November 2021. By contrast, DPW has only approved 2-9 applications per year under the ERP.

Blue Water Baltimore’s Response

Baltimore City must do more to help its residents. While the SOS program has helped more people than the ERP, both programs are still significantly underused and too limited in scope. Baltimore City should take the following actions:
- The City should assume responsibility for a sewage backup until proven otherwise; for both wet-weather surcharging and mainline blockages.
- Expand eligibility for both the ERP and SOS programs to all backups that occur in public sewer pipes, whether they occur in wet or dry weather.
- Advertise both the ERP and SOS programs more robustly.
- Improve the ERP by removing the arbitrary $5,000 cap on reimbursement and providing reimbursement for both property loss AND cleanup costs.

Have you experienced a sewage backup? Please let us know. Questions? Contact Taylor at tsmithhams@bluewaterbaltimore.org.

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