



Submit Testimony to the Baltimore City Council about Building Sewage Backups and Baltimore City's Expedited Reimbursement Program

Background

In 2018, Baltimore City launched a new Expedited Reimbursement Program to assist city residents with the costs of cleaning up sewage backing up into their home. But in the first two years of the program, when over 11,000 sewage backups were reported to 311, only 95 households applied for the reimbursement program – and only 12 were accepted and had their costs reimbursed.

On March 24th, the Health, Environment, and Technology Committee is holding another investigative hearing about what actions the city is taking to prevent sewage backups, the effectiveness of the Expedited Reimbursement Program, and other aspects of the city's response to this problem. This is an opportunity for you to shape how Baltimore City responds to this critical health risk and financial burden in the future.

How to Submit Testimony

Verbal Testimony:

You can speak for up to 2 minutes during the investigative hearing on **March 24th, 2021 at 10am**. You can [join the online hearing here](#).

Written Testimony:

Address your comments to Health, Environment, and Technology Committee Chair Danielle McCray and email your comments with the subject line "Comments re: 21-0016R, Sewage Building Backups" to the following Committee members and staff:

Danielle N. McCray, Chair, Danielle.McCray@baltimorecity.gov

Isaac "Yitzy" Schleifer, Isaac.Schleifer@baltimorecity.gov

James Torrence, James.Torrence@baltimorecity.gov

John T. Bullock, John.Bullock@baltimorecity.gov

Ryan Dorsey, Ryan.Dorsey@baltimorecity.gov

Mark Conway, Mark.Conway@baltimorecity.gov

Phylicia Porter, Phylicia.Porter@baltimorecity.gov

Matthew Peters, Staff to the Committee, Matthew.Peters@baltimorecity.gov

Testimony Suggestions

1. Introduce yourself and state that you're a Baltimore City resident.
2. Thank the committee for hosting this hearing and taking this issue seriously.
3. Share why this issue is important to you:
 - **Have you experienced a sewage backup?** What was it like to find the sewage? Who did you contact? How did they respond? How did you get it cleaned? How expensive were the damages?
 - **Are you concerned about the health impacts of sewage backups?** Exposure to raw sewage is very hazardous, and lingering dampness and bacteria can lead to mold and mildew problems with massive chronic health impacts.
 - **Are you concerned about the inequitable impacts of sewage backups?** Sewage backups can cost thousands of dollars in damages, and many Baltimore residents can't afford to pay those costs upfront and hope to be reimbursed months later.
 - **Are you worried that climate change is going to make this problem worse?** Climate change is projected to bring more frequent and severe rainstorms to our area, and rainstorms are a key cause of sewage backups.
4. Share any changes you think should be made to the Expedited Reimbursement Program and how the City responds to sewer backups. Here are some ideas:
 - **Very few applications to the Expedited Reimbursement Program have been filed – the program must be more widely advertised.** In the first two years of the program, there were over 11,000 sewage backups reported to 311, but only 95 applications were filed. DPW should advertise it on TV, social media, in newsletters, and via water bill inserts - at the bare minimum.
 - **The Expedited Reimbursement Program only applies to residences – it should also accept applications for reimbursement from organizations.** Sewer backups can happen in any building, and can pose a real financial burden for community organizations, religious institutions, small businesses, etc.
 - **The Expedited Reimbursement Program will only reimburse costs up to \$5,000 – this cap should be raised or removed entirely.** Recovering from a sewage backup can cost significantly more, and all reasonable costs should be covered.
 - **The Expedited Reimbursement Program only applies to sewer backups caused by wet weather – this restriction should be removed.** Many applications have been denied reimbursement because DPW determined their backup was not caused by wet weather, even when it happened during or shortly after a rainstorm. All backups caused by problems in city-owned sewage infrastructure should be eligible for reimbursement.
 - **The Expedited Reimbursement Program will only reimburse for costs of cleaning up – it should assist with all costs of a sewer backup.** Property damage can be the most expensive cost of a backup, particularly if furniture, drywall, HVAC systems, or hot water heaters are impacted. This program should include reimbursements for property loss and damage in addition to cleanup costs.

- **Baltimore City should make direct cleanup assistance available to households experiencing sewage backups.** Exposure to raw sewage is a significant health risk, and the city should make trained contractors available for cleanup at the city's expense so that residents aren't put in dangerous situations cleaning it up themselves.
5. Conclude by thanking committee members for their time and urging them to require Baltimore City to improve its response to sewer backups.