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Fact Sheet
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Sewage Backups in Baltimore Buildings

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 enter Baltimore City's sanitary 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 release 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 these outfalls as part of the Consent Decree, sewage backups into residents' homes have dramatically increased.



How is Baltimore City Addressing Sewage Backups?

- In April 2018, Baltimore City's Department of Public Works (DPW) launched a Pilot Expedited Reimbursement Program to help residents with the costs of cleanup for backups that occur from heavy rains.
- Applicants can receive up to \$2,500 to reimburse costs for pumping out sewage and disinfecting. They cannot be used to cover other costs, such as repairs, property loss, or lost wages.
- DPW received reports of 4,632 sewage backups in the Pilot Program's first year.
- Only 74 of those reports (1.6%) applied for reimbursement, demonstrating the lack of awareness of the program. DPW denied all but 10 applications (85%).
- DPW has only paid out \$14,775 (<1%) of the \$2 million set aside annually for reimbursements.
- DPW has denied applications on the basis that backups weren't caused by wet weather. Many of these denied claims happened on days with verified and widespread wet-weather sewage overflows elsewhere in the City.

Blue Water Baltimore's Response

Baltimore City must do more to help its residents. There are fundamental problems with the design and administration of the Expedited Reimbursement Program. Blue Water Baltimore supports the following key actions to improve the program:

- The City should assume responsibility for a sewage backup until proven otherwise.
- The arbitrary \$2,500 cap on reimbursement should be removed.
- Full reimbursement should be available for property loss as well as cleanup costs.
- The Program must be advertised more robustly, and residents should have more time to apply.
- The City should provide direct and immediate cleanup assistance to residents who experience a backup in their home.

In November 2019, the Land Use Committee of the Baltimore City Council held a public investigative hearing on DPW's pilot program. This hearing raised awareness of the issue but also left a lot of questions unanswered. The hearing was recessed and the follow-up hearing is on **Tuesday, March 17, 2020 from 10am-noon at City Hall.**

Resources

1. Baltimore City Department of Public Works. Building Backups Retrieved from <https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/sewer-consent-decree/building-backups>.
2. Baltimore City Department of Public Works. Modified Consent Decree Calendar Quarterly Report No. 7. Retrieved from <http://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/MCD%20Quarterly%20Report%2007.pdf>.
3. Baltimore City Department of Public Works. Sewage Backup Guide. Retrieved from https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/Sewage_Backup_Guide.pdf