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Chair Stein, Vice-Chair Robb-Blasdel, Ranking Member Weinstein, esteemed Members of the House Public Utilities Committee, I am grateful to join my colleague, Rep. Robb-Blasdel, to present sponsor testimony on HB 226. This bill is not just a regulatory update; it represents a lifesaving measure, aligning Ohio's lead safety standards with national benchmarks, and underscores our dedication to protecting the health and well-being of our citizens.

Currently, Ohio faces a significant public health challenge with an estimated 650,000 lead service lines still in operation, the second-highest number in the nation. These antiquated lines exist both on utility company and homeowner properties. Regrettably, the financial onus of replacing these lines falls heavily on homeowners. This often leads to inaction due to the prohibitive costs, leaving residents with no choice but to use potentially harmful water. Alarming, the majority of affected neighborhoods are older, with aging populations or economically marginalized residents.

This legislation aims to empower public water utilities, regulated by PUCO, with the means to replace customer-owned water service lines in conjunction with their scheduled utility main replacement projects. Additionally, it proposes a reimbursement mechanism for customers who independently undertake lead service line replacements. This approach not only facilitates infrastructure renewal but also addresses the financial challenges faced by Ohio's homeowners.

This legislation is deeply personal to me, as I am a survivor of childhood lead poisoning. My experience has given me firsthand knowledge of the dire consequences of lead exposure. Lead poisoning in children can lead to severe developmental issues, cognitive impairments, and an increased risk of chronic diseases like cardiovascular illness. Thankfully, my condition was identified early, and I was able to recover. Today, I stand before you, not just as a legislator, but as a testament to the resilience of those who have suffered from lead exposure, and as an advocate committed to ensuring that no other child endures similar hardships.

The human toll of lead poisoning, especially on children, cannot be overstated. It affects not just health but also educational outcomes and future potential. In communities already facing socio-economic challenges, lead poisoning exacerbates existing inequalities, entrapping families in cycles of poverty and health issues. This bill seeks to assist in the eradication of toxic lead water lines across Ohio. It promises to enhance equity, offering low-income and disadvantaged communities the fundamental right to clean, safe drinking water that many of us take for granted.

While this bill is narrowly focused, it is an important stride towards justice, equity, and a safer future for all Ohioans. It addresses a critical public health issue while balancing the financial implications for homeowners.

I want to thank you all for allowing us to provide remarks on HB 226. Together, we build an Ohio that turns the tide against lead poisoning and ensure a healthier future for all of us.

We look forward to any questions you have.