



Economic Matters Committee  
**HB 938—Support Bill**  
United Way of Central Maryland  
Franklyn Baker, President and Chief Executive Officer

Chairman Davis, Vice-Chair Dumais, and Members of the Economic Matters Committee  
Economic Matters Committee  
House Office Building, Room 231  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

February 24, 2020

Dear Chair Davis, Vice-Chair Dumais, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of United Way of Central Maryland, I am pleased to support House Bill 938, which establishes the Power to the People Pilot Program to provide home energy assistance to critical medically vulnerable individuals.

211 is a number people can call when they are in crisis—24 hours a day, 365 days a year in over 150 languages—and aren't sure where to turn for help with food, shelter, healthcare, childcare and other critical services. The 2-1-1 Maryland United Way Helpline is one of four 2-1-1 call centers in the state and the largest by call volume. We receive more than 100,000 calls each year from residents in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford and Howard Counties and Baltimore City. Help paying utility bills is one of our top three requests each year. Last year nearly a quarter of our calls (23,961) were from residents who needed help paying a utility bill.

The consequences of an unpaid utility bill for people with critical health problems can be dire. Their health may decline further in an unpowered home, and they may no longer be able to store or safely take refrigerated medication(s). When the utilities are turned off, critically ill people face an increased risk of eviction and the loss of their housing assistance.

To remedy this situation, in 2015 a utilities pilot program was launched to help people with critical medical needs. This partnership, the Critical Medical Needs Program (CMNP), includes the Office of Peoples Counsel, Office of Home Energy Programs, BGE, the Fuel Fund of Maryland, and the Cancer Support Foundation. The program utilizes 350 trained volunteer "Navigators" housed at medical facilities and community assistance agencies statewide. As a result, the Cancer Support Foundation has seen a 70% reduction in termination of power for its clients. Following these impressive results, the Maryland General Assembly passed Bill HB1189/SB425 in 2019, which secures continued funding for the CMNP.

While the previous pilot has generated significant impacts, we believe there are a significant number of medically vulnerable individuals in Maryland who are unaware of the program and may be in desperate need of its services. Currently, Navigators are only accessible to patients at a limited number of hospitals and medical centers. Patients cared for at facilities that do not participate in the CMNP may be unaware of the program. The volunteer Navigators are also not trained to meet patients' other needs such as helping them access healthy food, secure stable housing, or enroll in other benefit programs.

The proposed new pilot program, established by House Bill 938 and administered by the 211 MD United Way Helpline and the Fuel Fund of Maryland, will close this gap and significantly expand the CMNP's reach and impact. 211 MD United Way Helpline case managers funded through HB 938 will serve as full-time Navigators, helping critically ill people obtain energy assistance, over the phone and in-person. These case managers are trained in social work and counseling and will be able to use 2-1-1's database of more than 5,000 resources to connect individuals to other services they need.

HB 938 will significantly increase CMNP's reach and impact by utilizing the statewide name recognition of the 211 name brand, and its referral and information power combined with the Fuel Fund of Maryland's forty years of unprecedented experience in the energy assistance field. The Fuel Fund's geographic reach overlaps with the United Way of Central Maryland's service area—and we will serve clients across Central Maryland during the 3-year pilot period. At the conclusion of the pilot we will work with our partner call centers throughout Maryland to expand the program statewide.

HB 938 will enable us to significantly increase the positive impact of the Critical Medical Needs Program at a very low cost. For every dollar spent on 2-1-1 Navigators and other costs the program generates 4.6 dollars in assistance for medically vulnerable Marylanders in need. On behalf of the 2-1-1 Maryland United Way Helpline and United Way of Central Maryland, I respectfully urge you to support House Bill 938.

Sincerely,



Franklyn Baker,  
President and CEO, United Way of Central Maryland