



Committee: Finance

Testimony on: SB719 “Human Services – Office of Home Energy Programs – Uniform Redetermination Process”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 1, 2022

The Chesapeake Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility (CPSR) submits this testimony in support of SB719, which will remove administrative barriers and inconsistency in the Office of Home Energy Programs’ (OHEP) enrollment and redetermination processes for senior citizens qualified for low-income energy assistance.

CPSR is an active member of the Energy Advocates Coalition, a multi-organization partnership initiated by the Fuel Fund of Maryland, that works to identify and help resolve problems for Maryland households living at the intersection of poverty and energy burden. SB719 is a direct product of analyses and on-the-ground work with such households – specifically low-income elderly citizens – done by some of the Coalition’s member organizations.

The problem:

- **Over 40 percent of the population eligible for OHEP Energy Assistance are seniors (over age 60)¹**
- **Many seniors – especially those living with small, limited incomes – have difficulty navigating complicated administrative processes.** Some may have cognitive, physical, or literacy limitations that make completing such processes difficult or impossible. Those limitations, as well as lack of ability to travel, often make a requirement to complete administrative processes in person very difficult. In an era where their younger family members often live far away, many seniors have nobody to help them. Those on limited income, like small amounts of Social Security, may not have a computer, or if they do, no internet service; even if they have internet access, completing online forms is often challenging. The limitations and risks of doing things outside the home in the face of Covid have only made these challenges even greater for this high-risk segment of our citizenry.
- **OHEP’s present process for energy assistance eligibility redetermination is variable and unnecessarily complicated.** OHEP requires annual redetermination of energy assistance recipients’ eligibility. While OHEP has a stated policy of allowing automatic annual redetermination of senior eligibility, the various local offices and participating agencies who enroll energy assistance beneficiaries are variable in following this policy. The result is that many seniors are being required to re-apply and re-establish eligibility each year, a difficult administrative burden. Similarly, there is limited assistance available to seniors whose ability to complete required redetermination processes at home or in person is limited.

The solution: HB719 will address these unnecessary administrative energy assistance difficulties for eligible seniors.

¹ Applied Public Policy Research Institute for Study and Evaluation (APPRISE), *Maryland Low-Income Market Characterization Report*; prepared for the Maryland Office of People’s Counsel; October, 2018

- HB719 simply requires OHEP itself and its implementing offices and local administering agencies to observe the uniform practice of annual redetermination of eligibility for seniors whose eligibility has not changed, without their having to go through the complex re-application process.
- HB719 requires OHEP's local administering agencies to offer locations that are reasonably accessible to seniors for providing energy assistance enrollment and redetermination processes, and notification of these services to all income eligible seniors.
- HB719 also requires establishment of a policy to provide assistance – in the form of a home visit or assistance to the senior on their behalf by another individual – to allow those who are not able to complete the process on their own to receive the energy assistance – and its continuation – for which they are eligible.

The fact that low-income seniors are a substantial share of Maryland residents who need and are eligible for energy assistance is often overlooked. It is a reminder, however, that we often forget the needs of those who have lived productive lives and now face the limitations of poverty, diminished capacity, and isolation.

HB719 is one important part of recognizing, and responding to, this reality.

For this reason, CPSR strongly supports HB719, and urges a favorable report by this Committee.

Respectfully,

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