



**HB 139 - Landlord and Tenant - Office of Home Energy Programs - Financial Assistance
Environment and Transportation Committee**

January 30, 2024

SUPPORT

Chairman Korman, Vice-Chair Boyce and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 139. This bill will require landlords to accept financial assistance from the Maryland Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) for the cost of utility services that a tenant is required to pay.

The CASH Campaign of Maryland promotes economic advancement for low-to-moderate income individuals and families in Baltimore and across Maryland. CASH accomplishes its mission through operating a portfolio of direct service programs, building organizational and field capacity, and leading policy and advocacy initiatives to strengthen family economic stability. CASH and its partners across the state achieve this by providing free tax preparation services through the IRS program 'VITA', offering free financial education and coaching, and engaging in policy research and advocacy. **Almost 4,000 of CASH's tax preparation clients earn less than \$10,000 annually. More than half earn less than \$20,000.**

OHEP provides financial support for low-income households through various ways, including with their energy and utility bills. Tenants' whose utilities are included in their rent may qualify for certain OHEP programs, which means OHEP's payment will be credited towards rent for the tenant. Although many landlords accept the payment from OHEP, they are not currently required to by law. HB 139 would require landlords to accept these payments, which would greatly benefit low-income households who qualify for OHEP programs.

According to Prosperity Now's most recent scorecard for Maryland, 20.2% of Maryland households experience income volatility, and 26.7% had difficulty paying for usual household expenses.¹ This shows that at least one fifth of Marylanders struggle to pay for basic expenses, including rent. In Maryland, the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom housing unit is \$1,281 a month, which means it would take 3.1 minimum wage jobs to pay rent every month.² Individuals and families are struggling to pay to live in Maryland, and HB 139 would provide low-income households with some financial relief.

We have seen the financial difficulties our clients face first-hand at CASH. Last year our benefits team worked with over 600 households across the state to receive benefits, including OHEP's energy and financial assistance. Requiring landlords to accept payments from OHEP would serve our clients and low-income Marylanders across the state by providing both financial support and housing assurance.

Thus, we encourage you to return a favorable report for HB 139.

¹ Prosperity Now: <https://scorecard.prosperitynow.org/data-by-location#state/md>

² Health Care for the Homeless: <https://www.hchmd.org/homelessness-maryland>