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COMMITTEE: ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORTATION

TESTIMONY ON: **HB 648** - UNIFORM REDETERMINATION PROCESS – AGE

POSITION: FOR INFORMATION

HEARING DATE: **FEBRUARY 17** AT 1:00 PM

WASHINGTON GAS RESPECTFULLY SUBMITS THIS STATEMENT **FOR INFORMATION OF HOUSE BILL 648 – OFFICE OF HOME ENERGY PROGRAMS – UNIFORM REDETERMINATION PROCESS – AGE**

The Commitment to Affordability

Washington Gas Light Company (“Company” or “WGL”) acknowledges its commitment to pursue affordability and accountability regarding utility expenditures that are recovered from customers. WGL has a sustained record of affordability thanks to prudent management of capital costs and operations and maintenance expense, targeted investment in safety and workforce development, and rigorous energy acquisition protocols.

Purpose of HB 648

HB 648 proposes to lower the age at which certain eligible energy customers qualify for a certain redetermination process for enrollment in energy assistance programs. The current statutory eligibility age to participate is 65; HB 648 proposes to lower the eligibility age to 60.

Background

In 2023 Maryland initiated a Universal Redetermination Process (URP) to streamline the application process for Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) recipients aged 60 and older, as well as for disabled customers who are permanently disabled and/or have completed an OHEP application through the Critical Medical Needs program, with eligible income types (SSI, SSDI, Social Security, and Pension). HB 648 would amend the Human Services Article to conform § 5-5A-09’s age eligibility with the URP.

Bill Analysis

Lowering the eligibility age broadens coverage, which is good for low-income customers and the utilities that serve them. WGL works with customers every day to manage their bills and to seek available governmental assistance for them. Given the current economic environment, and given the increase in Maryland’s unemployment rate, WGL believes lowering the eligibility age to 60 will benefit customers in need, who make up nearly 7% of the State’s population.

Washington Gas also supports an increase in energy assistance funding to meet current needs and the needs of newly qualified energy consumers. The Company is mindful of not increasing utility bills at present and looks forward to working with the Committee to find creative and durable ways to support customers struggling to pay their utility bills, while maintaining safe and reliable service.

WGL appreciates the Committee's interest in expanding program eligibility and notes that pairing a broader qualifying age with sufficient funding will help ensure these services remain effective and responsive to customer needs. The Company is committed to partnering with relevant State agencies to identify and leverage existing and emerging resources that best support Maryland energy consumers.

Washington Gas' Commitment to Energy Assistance

As the Committee is aware, WGL strongly supports Maryland's energy assistance programs. WGL participates in LiHEAP; MEAP; USPP (year-round monthly budget billing); WAP (weatherization); and the Arrearage Retirement Assistance grant program. Further, WGL has actively participated in and supports the consensus recommendations of the Workgroup Report in PC-59, Limited Income Mechanisms for Utility Customers, in which docket the Commission issued an order on February 12, 2026. The Company looks forward to participating in Phase II of the proceeding to develop further support for low-income energy consumers.

Washington Gas also offers the following Company support options for low-income customers:

- Flexible payment arrangements – Customers may enter into bill payment installment plans for up to 12-months, or 24-months for customers receiving energy assistance with no down payment required.
- Budget Plan – To manage seasonal fluctuations in bills, customers can enroll in budget plans that spread costs evenly throughout the year, providing predictable and easier-to budget payments.
- Consistent with the Company's longstanding practice, WGL does not terminate residential customers for non-payment from November 1st through March 31st.

Finally, WGL founded the Washington Area Fuel Fund (WAFF) in 1983. WAFF has distributed more than \$34 million to 320,000 people.

- In 2024 WAFF provided more than \$700,000 customers in Charles, St. Mary's, Frederick, Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, including \$123,000 for 400 applications when State funding was exhausted.
- Washington Gas pays all administrative and promotional fees of WAFF.
- Starting in January 2026, WAFF assistance is available to households that use natural gas for heating, in WGL service territory and portions of BGE and of CGV territory.

About Washington Gas

Washington Gas Light Company provides safe, reliable natural gas service to more than 1.2 million customers in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. WGL has been providing energy to residential, commercial, government, and industrial customers for more than 177 years, and currently serves nearly 520,000 Maryland customers in Montgomery, Prince George's, Charles, St. Mary's, Frederick, and Calvert Counties. The Company employs over 600 employees in Maryland, and hundreds of outside contractors, plumbers, union workers, and other skilled tradespeople. The Company strives to improve the quality of life in our communities by maintaining a locally-based workforce, working with suppliers that represent and reflect the communities we serve, and giving back through its charitable contributions and employee volunteer activities. The Company, together with other natural gas distribution utilities, are responsible for delivering the primary source of heat to Maryland residential energy consumers, serving approximately one half of all Maryland households while providing critical energy services to residential, commercial, and industrial customers at one-third the cost of electricity on a per unit basis.

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