

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2023 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
Enrolled - Revised

House Bill 630

(Delegate Queen, *et al.*)

Economic Matters

Education, Energy, and the Environment

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Utility Account Holders - Victims of Abuse - Protections

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This bill authorizes a utility account holder to terminate the account holder's future liability under a utility contract if the individual is a victim of abuse, subject to specified notice and documentation requirements. The utility must allow for the termination, provided that the bill's requirements are met. An account holder who terminates a utility contract under the bill is responsible for utility charges only up to and including the billing cycle during which written notice is submitted to the utility as part of the termination process. Additionally, the utility must allow the account holder to open a new utility account for a new premises, notwithstanding an account balance or arrearage at the former premises.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** The Public Service Commission (PSC) can handle the bill's requirements with existing budgeted resources. The bill does not otherwise materially affect State finances or operations.

**Local Effect:** To the extent that the bill alters existing processes, local utilities can likely handle the bill's requirements with existing budgeted resources.

**Small Business Effect:** Minimal.

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Analysis

**Bill Summary:** "Utility" means an electric company, an electricity supplier, a gas company, a gas supplier, a sewage disposal company, a water company, or any combination of these companies. "Abuse" has the meaning stated in § 4-501(b) of the Family Law Article.

The written notification required for an account holder to terminate future liability under a utility contract must include information documenting the abuse; more specifically, the notification must include either a copy of a certain enforceable final peace or protective order issued under specified provisions of current law or a copy of a report by a “qualified third party” that describes the incident, subject to additional specified requirements. A “qualified third party” is a licensed physician or psychologist, a social worker or caseworker, or an advocate from a domestic violence or sexual assault prevention or assistance program.

## **Current Law:**

### *Public Service Commission and Utility Accounts*

PSC regulates gas, electric, telephone, water, sewage disposal, and certain passenger transportation companies doing business in Maryland. No current law or regulations adopted by PSC specifically address the release from a contract in the event of an account holder being a victim of domestic violence.

A cursory review of various utility websites by the Department of Legislative Services did not reveal a utility policy directly addressing the release from a contract in the event of an account holder being a victim of domestic violence. However, that does not preclude the existence of such policies – whether formal or informal.

The bill applies to gas and electric companies, gas and electricity suppliers (under customer choice), and for-profit water and sewer companies. Among similar entities not included in the bill, based on existing definitions in the Public Utilities Article, are telephone companies, government-owned water/sewer companies, and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

### *Victims of Abuse*

An individual may generally seek relief from abuse by filing a petition for a protective order with the court or, if the clerk’s office is closed, with a District Court commissioner. Under limited circumstances, a petition may also be filed electronically from specified locations.

Section 4-501(b) of the Family Law Article defines “abuse” as:

- an act that causes serious bodily harm;
- an act that places a person eligible for relief in fear of imminent serious bodily harm;
- assault in any degree;

- rape or sexual offense under specified statutory provisions or attempted rape;
- sexual offense in any degree;
- false imprisonment;
- stalking; or
- revenge porn.

If the person for whom relief is sought is a child, “abuse” may also include abuse of a child, as defined in statute. “Abuse” may also include abuse of a vulnerable adult, as defined in statute, if the person for whom relief is sought is a vulnerable adult.

**Additional Comments:** [State data](#) indicates about 30,000 to 35,000 domestic violence incidents were reported each year from 2015 through 2020. There are approximately 2.4 million retail electric customer accounts.

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### Additional Information

**Prior Introductions:** Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

**Designated Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Public Service Commission; Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services; Office of People’s Counsel; Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 13, 2023  
rh/lgc Third Reader - March 17, 2023  
Revised - Amendment(s) - March 17, 2023  
Enrolled - April 12, 2023  
Revised - Amendment(s) - April 12, 2023  
Revised - Correction - April 12, 2023

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