



Economic Matters
HB 969 - Favorable Response

Debbie Brown, Director, Fuel Fund of Maryland

Thank you, Chairman Davis and members of the House Economic Matters Committee. My name is Debbie Brown. I am honored to be the Director at the Fuel Fund of Maryland.

I am here today testifying **in support of HB 969** which establishes the **Power to the People Pilot program** to help provide home energy assistance to critical medically ill individuals.

Since 1981, the Fuel Fund has been a lifeline for our vulnerable Maryland neighbors struggling with a home utility hardship during a financial crisis.

The consequences of an unpaid utility bill for people with **critical health issues can be disastrous**. Health may decline further in an unpowered home where refrigerated medications can't be stored safely, or special medical equipment requires electricity to function.

The Critical Medical Needs Program (CMNP), HB1189/SB 425, passed by the Maryland General Assembly in 2019 partners with 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 the medical facilities and community assistance agencies statewide.

While CMNP has generated significant impacts, individuals with critical medical needs must have a Navigator to receive support. But, if there is no Navigator at their medical facility, then the patient becomes "lost" in the tumultuous waters of the energy assistance process.

When a CMNP client is referred to the Fuel Fund from OHEP, they still have a balance due on their BGE bill. An important component of the Fuel Fund is the distribution of energy credits from BGE to the Fuel Fund. **HB 969** will allow the designated Fuel Fund staffer to "pound the pavement" for additional funding resources, along with the BGE credits, to pay the utility bill in full for the critical medically ill client.

HB 969 will increase the footprint of the Critical Medical Needs Program, filling an important service gap in the community by utilizing the Fuel Fund of Maryland's 40 years of established and unprecedented experience in the energy assistance field.

As a result of COVID-19, the Fuel Fund has assisted 32 critical medical needs patients with their utility bills. We have spent over \$37,000 to date with an average grant size of \$1,200 per household. The need for **HB 969** has never been greater!

On behalf of the Fuel Fund of Maryland, I respectfully urge a favorable report for **HB 969**. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.