

BILL NUMBER: House Bill 969

COMMITTEE: Economic Matters

BILL TITLE: Home Energy Assistance - Critical Medical Needs Program - Power to the People Pilot Program

DHS POSITION: Letter of Information

The Department of Human Services (the Department) respectfully offers this letter of information regarding House Bill 969 (HB 969). HB 969 provides an annual appropriation of \$80,000 to the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP), to establish the Power to the People Pilot Program in partnership with the United Way of Central Maryland and the Fuel Fund of Maryland. This pilot seeks to expand access to the Critical Medical Needs (CMN) program.

The Critical Medical Needs Pilot Program was a voluntary partnership between the Office of Home Energy Programs, the Office of the People's Counsel, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the advocate community, and utility providers. This pilot was formally codified in law within the Office of Home Energy Programs with the passage of the Critical Medical Needs Program Act of 2019 (Chapters 282 and 283). Since then, OHEP continues to build out the infrastructure needed for a robust and successful CMN program.. These efforts include establishing formal processes, updating the OHEP Data Management System, and training navigators.

The vast majority of current CMN navigators operate within Central Maryland. The greatest need for expansion is geographic in nature, particularly in more rural communities throughout the State. It is worth noting that both organizations identified in the bill are located in Central Maryland. Moreover, while the 2-1-1 United Way call center can indeed accept calls from all over the State, the Fuel Fund of Maryland generally does not assist customers outside of the BGE service territory, with a few exceptions.

For years, OHEP Local Administering Agencies have been required to perform home visits for applicants who cannot go to their local OHEP office in person. These home visits facilitate access to energy assistance benefits, regardless of whether the potential applicant is a critically medically vulnerable individual. The United Way or the Fuel Fund of Maryland would require the capacity to perform home visits or collect documents in person, not only for individuals in Central Maryland, but across the State.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to share the aforementioned information regarding HB 969 and respectfully requests that this information be considered during the Committee's deliberations.