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Economic Matters Committee

Subcommittees

Public Utilities

Workers' Compensation



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

HB 138 – DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES – ELECTRIC UNIVERSAL
SERVICE PROGRAM- ELIGIBILITY

TESTIMONY OF DELEGATE LORIG CHARKOUDIAN

JANUARY 20, 2021

Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and Members of the Economic Matters Committee,

There are over 90,000 households across the state that rely on support from the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) to keep their heat and lights on in difficult times. The OHEP manages two programs to administer this vital utility assistance.

The Maryland Energy Assistance Program (MEAP) is a federally funded program that supports low-income individuals with home heating bills. As such, it requires that Maryland use federally established eligibility guidelines including citizenship, residency, and income guidelines based on household size.

The Electric Universal Service Program (EUSP) is a state program that is partially funded through a utility rate payer surcharge. It operates as a grant which is credited to the household electricity bill in 12 monthly credits. Maryland statute established the program to be widely available to every household that meets the income guidelines in the statute.

At present, OHEP uses one consolidated application process for both programs. However, using one application prevents households who are eligible for EUSP but not eligible for MEAP from accessing the EUSP assistance they are rightfully eligible to receive. When the General Assembly created EUSP it was intended for the program to be widely accessible. The intention was for all income qualified Marylanders to access utility assistance, regardless of immigration status.

This issue was discussed in the 2021 Session during the ECM discussions about HB606. Attached to this testimony is a letter from Former Chairman Dereck Davis to DHS Secretary Padilla which includes a request for the following change in the DHS regulations:

“Allow Marylanders to either apply for EUSP and MEAP together or to apply directly to EUSP without requiring the documentation required by LIHEAP:

Public Utilities Article 7-512.1 (A, 4) gives OHEP the ability to coordinate EUSP benefits, with benefits from MEAP and other assistance programs. The goal in this statute is to streamline the application process for Maryland residents seeking help. However, OHEP currently determines eligibility using the federal LIHEAP requirements. The result is that Maryland residents who should be eligible for EUSP benefits, but are not eligible for MEAP benefits, are not able to apply for any benefits. Specifically, households that do not have anyone with a social security number are not able to apply for LIHEAP funds. The current structure also excludes them from EUSP assistance. It was never the intention of the Maryland General Assembly to deny these households EUSP funds (which they also pay into every month with their electric bills). My request is that you modify COMAR 07.03.22.03 so that individuals with no one in their home meeting the LIHEAP criteria have the ability to apply for EUSP funds.”

In Secretary Padilla’s response she indicated that the Department was reviewing the request, as quoted below:

“The Department is reviewing the request to remove the “qualified alien” requirement from EUSP eligibility from legal, fiscal, and program perspectives. The findings will be presented, and the issue addressed through the Workgroup on Low-Income Utility Assistance created by the HB 606 legislation.”

DHS and the Workgroup on Low-Income Utility Assistance have yet to act on this request, therefore, this legislation will establish a requirement for OHEP to allow Marylanders who qualify for EUSP funds under current statute to be able to access those funds.

I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 138.