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HB 998 Silver Energy Savers Program and Energy Assistance Fund
FAVORABLE
House Economic Matters Committee
March 3, 2022

Good afternoon, Chair Wilson, and members of the House Economic Matters Committee. I am Tammy Bresnahan, Director Advocacy for AARP MD. AARP MD and its over 850,000 members support **HB 998 Silver Energy Savers Program and Energy Assistance Fund**. We thank Delegate Carey for sponsoring this important legislation.

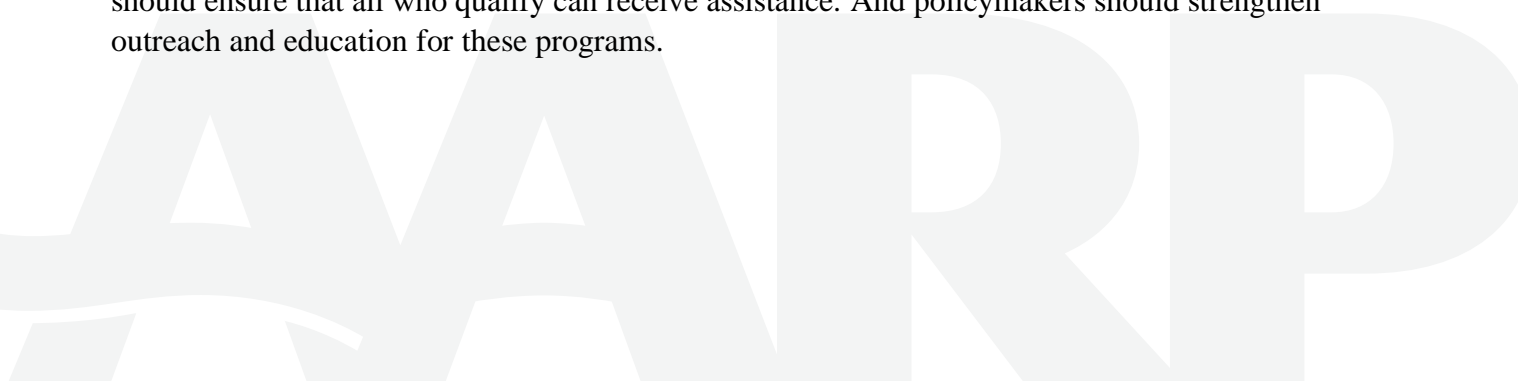
HB 998 establishes a Silver Energy Savers Program in the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) in the Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide bill assistance to eligible energy customers who are at least 60 years old. OHEP must designate four regional centers to administer the program and approve a third-party supplier to provide assistance through the program. The bill also establishes the OHEP Energy Assistance Fund, administered by DHS, to be used for administrative costs of the program, including staffing.

In Maryland, 41% of the 400,000 low-income households are older adults 60 and older. Since the pandemic, residential prices for natural gas, electricity, and fuel oil have increased significantly. According to the Applied Public Policy Research Report "APPRISE", low-income older households spend an average of 13 percent of their income on residential energy. In 2021, OHEP overall denial rates, the portion of families that applied for OHEP grants were denied, was 45% per OHEP reporting to the Public Service Commission.

Home energy costs are a major expense for U.S. households. Price increases have a greater impact on older consumers and households with lower incomes. Too often, older adults with low incomes must choose between cutting back on energy expenditures and reducing spending for other necessities. They may end up risking their health or comfort.

When home energy prices are high or unpredictable, older adults may be unable to adequately cool and heat their homes. Such exposure can lead to a host of adverse health outcomes. These can range from the aggravation of chronic health conditions to food spoilage and even premature death.

Regulators and lawmakers should ensure that consumers with low incomes can afford their utilities. This includes telecommunications, energy, and water. Utility assistance programs should ensure that all who qualify can receive assistance. And policymakers should strengthen outreach and education for these programs.



HB 998 will:

- Help more low-income seniors keep their heat and lights on by ensuring that seniors 60 and older send in complete applications, resulting in more energy assistance grants.
- Address the technology and digital divide by offering an inbound telephonic service that will answer the phone and offer help and support.
- Ensures consistent energy assistance information and service for seniors living in any Maryland ZIP code.
- Offer seniors extra support to handle a tricky application that has high denial rates. We presume they're even higher for seniors, though that data isn't public.
- Provide essential follow-up connection if documents are missing and the application is in on track for denial.

For these reasons, AARP MD respectfully request the Committee issue a Favorable report on HB 998. For questions or follow up, please contact Tammy Bresnahan at tbresnahan@arp.org or at 410-302-8451.