

**BILL NO:** House Bill 630  
**TITLE:** Public Utilities - Primary and Secondary Account Holders - Domestic  
Violence Protections  
**COMMITTEE:** Economic Matters  
**HEARING DATE:** February 16, 2023  
**POSITION:** **SUPPORT**

---

The Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore is a “one-stop-shop” in Baltimore City where survivors of crime can access a full range of wraparound legal, supportive social and nursing care, and mental health services in one place, which research has shown provides the best outcomes for survivors who are often managing myriad and complex needs. ROAR aims to co-create with survivors a community in which people who experience crime or systemic injustice are empowered to achieve their own sense of justice, healing, and well-being. ROAR’s mission is to engage with individuals and communities in Baltimore City by providing holistic, client-driven services to survivors of crime and influencing efforts to reform systemic responses to crime. **ROAR urges the House Economic Matters Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 630.**

At ROAR we assist victims of all types of crime, abuse, and harm who live in or were harmed in Baltimore City, about 25% of whom are survivors of domestic violence. Most of the victims who have come to ROAR have not called the police due to fear of their own safety or of the person who is harming them due to their race or ethnicity and sadly all to regular acts of police violence against Black and brown communities, fear of deportation, fear the police will minimize the harm or do anything and then the violence may escalate once they leave, or fear that they may be outed as LGBTQIA+. ROAR intentionally seeks to serve those least likely to engage with law enforcement since there are so few resources and supports to those who choose not to call the police.

At ROAR we have staff attorneys, paralegals, case managers, therapists, and a nurse care manager to provide wrap-around and comprehensive support to survivors of crime. The most frequent request we receive from all survivors – and this is very true for domestic violence survivors – is the need to find a safe and affordable place to live. ROAR’s case managers and attorneys work together to assist a survivor with terminating a lease, seeking a voucher transfer, or an emergency transfer in public housing, locate a new place to live where the survivors and often their children can feel safe and start to rebuild a sense of home, and – when necessary, as is so often with survivors of domestic violence – assist the survivor in enrolling in the MD Safe at Home Address Confidentiality Program. Once a new home has been found, ROAR’s case managers will continue to assist our clients in the moving process: securing a moving vehicle, making sure first month and security deposit is secured, and that the survivor has all they need to set up home. Time and time again, the last barrier many survivors face is discovering that there is large balance owed to BG&E in an account set up in the survivor’s name and they either did not know the account was in their name, or did not know that the bill had been left unpaid for so long. BG&E will not allow anyone to establish a new account at a new address when there is an arrearage owed under that person’s name in an existing or terminated account. So until that arrearage is paid, the survivor will not have any electricity at her new address, which is an obvious risk to safety, health, and well-being.

I will share the story of a woman who came to ROAR in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. I will call her Ruth. Ruth was terrified because her husband had severely beaten her the night before and a neighbor had taken her to the hospital for treatment for the injuries she sustained. The social worker at the hospital put her in contact with ROAR, but she was already receiving calls from her husband wanting to know where she was and when she would be home. When she first came to ROAR, she was so afraid of her husband and did not trust the police or prosecutors to keep her husband contained long enough for her and their four children to escape their shared apartment and find a new place to live. She was very clear that she did not want to call the police because the last time she had her husband was arrested and released the next day when he came home and beat her ruthlessly as punishment for his night in jail.

Ruth had been working as a daycare provider at a home-based childcare center run by the same neighbor who had helped her the night before. However, due to Covid-19 the neighbor's business had lost all of their clients and Ruth was laid off. She did receive Covid-19 unemployment insurance income, but her husband had forced her to set it up to directly deposit into their joint account. Ruth met with one of ROAR's case managers for weeks planning how she would safely leave the house when her husband was scheduled to leave town for a few days for a hunting trip in Virginia. She worked diligently and even excitedly as the prospect of having her own home so that she and her children could be far away from the harm her husband had been causing her for over 10 years. Everything was set. ROAR was able to use Covid-19 emergency funds to pay for Ruth's first month's rent, security deposit, and a moving van, which maxed out the amount ROAR typically could afford to pay per client, since the funding was very minimal. ROAR had connected Ruth to other social service agencies where she was able to get furniture and household necessities for the kitchen and bath. ROAR had helped Ruth secure a job close to her new home and she would make enough money to pay the rent. The lease was signed and the moving truck scheduled. Ruth's had not felt this good in years!

But then Ruth called BG&E to set up an electric account for her new home. She was very excited because she had never had a bill in her own name, since her husband would not let her in the past. She was shocked to hear that not only was she on the account at her husband's home but that there was an outstanding bill of nearly \$600 that would have to be paid before she could set up an account at her new home. Time was of the essence since Ruth's husband would only be gone for a few days and she could not move into the house without electricity turned on since all four of her children would be moving with her. ROAR's case managers did all they could to advocate on Ruth's behalf to get her name removed from the account, to express hardship, and to find moneys from other programs to help pay down the balance. In the end, ROAR made a special exception to their policy of the maximum amount it would pay per client so that ROAR could dip back into its modest client emergency fund to pay off the arrears, since that was the only thing standing between Ruth and her children finding safety. ROAR was able to make this payment, but that should not and cannot be the solution to this reoccurring issue facing people across Maryland when they are trying to escape domestic violence.

For the above stated reasons, **ROAR urges a favorable report on HB 630.**