



# Welfare Advocates

Founded 1979

228 W. Lexington Street — Suite 220 • Baltimore, Maryland 21201-3432  
Phone: 410.261.5874 • Fax: 410.889.0203

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## House Bill 323 Social Services Programs – Eligibility and Enrollment

House Economic Matters Committee  
February 16, 2023

### Support

*Welfare Advocates is a statewide coalition of social service organizations, advocacy groups, faith communities, and community members, whose mission it is to educate about and advocate for an adequate safety net and public policies that support families moving towards economic stability.*

**Welfare Advocates supports HB 323**, which requires the Department of Human Services to streamline access to safety-net programs by automatically enrolling individuals in public benefits based on their eligibility for other safety-net programs.

**Amidst record inflation and unemployment, many Marylanders are struggling to make ends meet.** Before the pandemic, one in ten Marylanders were living at or below the Federal Poverty Line, and COVID has only exacerbated the struggles of low-income individuals and families.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, the need for safety-net programs in our state has exploded, and has put a spotlight on the entrenched barriers and inequities that have long existed in our programs and policies to address and end poverty, especially for Black and Brown communities that have disproportionately borne the brunt of economic downturns due to systemic racism and historic disinvestment. A dizzying maze of applications, departments, and varying eligibility requirements means that - even for Marylanders who qualify – safety-net programs only reach a fraction of the people who need them.

**Public benefit programs – like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Energy Assistance - provide vital resources to low-income families, and strengthen our State’s economy.** Families use benefits to purchase housing, food, utilities, and meet other basic needs. These funds are immediately spent in the local economy, generating economic growth. Consequently, improving access to safety-net programs benefits families and Maryland’s businesses, communities, and local economies. Without improving access to safety-net programs, Marylanders will continue to bear the societal costs of homelessness and poverty.

**HB 323 simplifies access to safety-net programs by automatically enrolling individuals in benefits they are eligible for based on their eligibility for other programs.** Welfare Advocates believes that all Marylanders should have easy access to the public benefits they are eligible for, and categorical eligibility is an important step to improve the economic security of Marylanders struggling in or near poverty.

**WA appreciates your consideration, and respectfully urges a favorable report on HB 323.**

Submitted by Lisa Klingenmaier, *Chair of Welfare Advocates*

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<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau. 2020. American Community Survey

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