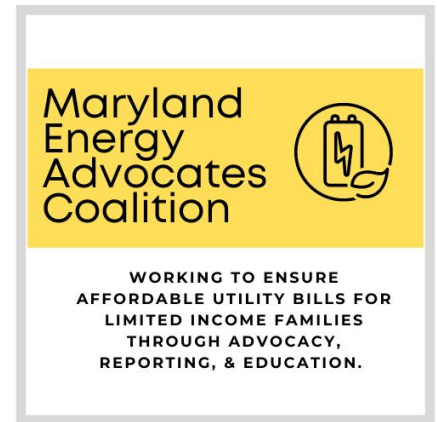


TESTIMONY IN **SUPPORT** OF HB323

Social Services Programs - Eligibility and
Enrollment

Education, Energy and the Environment
Committee Hearing
March 28, 2023



Chairman Feldman and members of Education, Energy and the Environment Committee: Maryland Energy Advocates is a coalition of non-profits, foundations, churches and volunteers that advocate, directly help, and support policies and change to ensure that the Maryland's low income segment will one day have affordable utility bills that run about 6% of their households' income.

Utility bills are often over-looked. A joke we say is that, "Few care, or are passionate about utility bills, until you are." Then it's usually a crisis with families facing termination notices.

Several of us work directly with Marylanders in home energy utility crisis. Considered low-income by the federal and state government, about 45% are seniors, folks that are disabled, out of work, or work, but don't make enough income to cover their family expenses.

Here's how this HB323 could work in reality if passed and implemented well.

The first example from the field is the solution if this HB323 is passed.

A family, two seniors, and both are younger than 67, is income-eligible for food assistance and utility bill assistance. This couple earns less than \$2,670 in gross income a month, or \$32,040. Their utility bill averages about \$2,000 and with meds and food and rent, they're struggling. In September, they go around their house and gather a bunch of verification papers to prove they indeed are low-income: state ID's, actual social security cards, rental lease and payments for rent, current Social Security benefits letters, Pepco and Washington Gas bills. They drive on a Tuesday to their local Montgomery County Department of Social Security office. They wait for a bit,

and then a State certifier works with them and indeed they are low-income, they need food stamps, now called SNAP, and energy assistance to get monthly bill payment credits. One trip, one application, one intake visit by the state, and one set of documents. This elderly couple has applied for and will receive income-eligible grants to help bolster their family's finances.

This common-sense process is how it's supposed to have worked for years.

Yet here's how it's implemented today. It seems 95% of the folks we help in the field are enrolled in SNAP, but not in energy assistance.

These SNAP-enrolled families are unaware, and not enrolled in, OHEP bill pay assistance. The consequence of not receiving this income-eligible benefit, is that usually around end of February after the heater's been running expensive fuel, they are in crisis with sky-high Pepco and Washington Gas bills. The helper teams in the field, the OHEP offices' staff and the residents are all "in the foxhole" scrambling to get this couple's application through OHEP energy assistance in time to beat the power cut off. If this second, sometimes third state benefit application is done, again, on another day, by the same couple, on time, a 55-day account hold is placed on the utility account so that this energy assistance application can run its long course through OHEP, get approved, get grants credited to account and avoid cut-off.

HB323 is a smart, responsible streamlined bill that makes our state more effective for income-eligible benefits. Energy Advocates thanks Delegate Charkoudian, Secretary Lopez for their sponsorship of this highly important bill.