



BILL NO: House Bill 630
TITLE: Utility Account Holders - Victims of Abuse - Protections
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
HEARING DATE: March 28, 2023
POSITION: **SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS**

The Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV) is the state domestic violence coalition that brings together victim service providers, allied professionals, and concerned individuals for the common purpose of reducing intimate partner and family violence and its harmful effects on our citizens. **MNADV urges the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee to issue a favorable report with amendment on HB 630.**

MNADV requests the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee make a technical amendment to clarify that HB 630 applies to protective orders in addition to peace orders. We suggest that on page 3, line 24, strike “PEACE” and substitute “PROTECTIVE.” The current language cites the the protective order statute but refers to it as a peace order and in the next section discusses and cites the peace order statutes.

There are many barriers a victim of domestic violence must overcome when planning to leave a violent and abusive relationship. House Bill 630 is intended to address one obstacle and will improve the ability of a victim of domestic violence to safely escape. Enabling a victim of domestic violence to remove themselves from a shared utilities account or contract can enhance the possibility that they can separate from their abuser and establish a safe life elsewhere. The documentation required for eligibility is comparable to what is required to enroll in the Address Confidentiality Program.¹ Eligibility for the Address Confidentiality Program is also contingent upon the relocation of a victim to a new address compounding the importance of a victim’s ability to establish themselves separately from their abuser.

To fully appreciate the need for HB 630 it is important to understand some of the complexities of domestic violence and its intersection with economic justice. The most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is when they leave, increasing the risk of homicide as well as increased violence.² It is also estimated that between 94-99% of domestic violence victims have experienced economic abuse.³ Additionally, 38% of all victims of domestic violence become homeless at some point in their lives.⁴

¹ MD STATE GOVT § 7-304

² <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>

³ <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/quick-guide-economic-and-financial-abuse>

⁴ https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Library_TH_2018_DV_Housing_Homelessness.pdf



Safety planning is one of the many services domestic violence programs provide and it is crucial for the safety of the victim leaving and any children or other relatives escaping with them. Domestic violence service providers in Maryland report that one of the significant issues that they navigate with victims when planning a safe exit is utility accounts. They encounter obstacles in establishing new accounts often because there are existing accounts. Victims may not even have known their names were on those accounts at all and there may be money owed. It is imperative that the abuser not be alerted that any changes have been to an account since that could trigger their knowledge that their victim is planning to leave. This is not the termination of the utility account but the removal of one party's name and obligation, the victim.

Other states have begun to address this issue. The most comparable to HB 630 is New York's statute which allows for a victim of domestic violence to remove their name and opt-out of a shared utility, phone, and television contract without penalty with self-attestation that they are a victim of domestic violence.⁵ The need to be released from an existing contract is most consistent with the initial identified need of victims of domestic violence in Maryland who find themselves on a shared utilities contract and planning to escape their abuser.

For the above stated reasons, the **Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence urges a favorable report with amendment on HB 630.**

⁵ <https://law.justia.com/codes/new-york/2022/pbs/article-2/48-a/>

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