

HB 138
Electric Universal Service Program Eligibility Clarification

This bill requires the Maryland Department of Human Services to establish a process so all income qualified Marylanders can access utility assistance, regardless of immigration status. Everyone should be able to keep the heat and lights on in difficult times.

Background:

There are two significant energy assistance programs in Maryland, managed by the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) in the Department of Human Services. The Electric Universal Service Program (EUSP) and the Maryland Energy Assistance Program (MEAP) both assist low-income Marylanders in paying their energy bills. MEAP is a federally funded program that supports families and individuals with home heating bills, and, as such, requires that Maryland use federally established eligibility requirements.

EUSP is a state program that is partially funded through a utility rate payer surcharge. It is disbursed as a grant credited to the household electricity bill in 12 monthly credits. These subsidies are paid directly to qualified electric utilities. Maryland statute established the program to be widely available to households that meet the income guidelines in statute.

OHEP uses one consolidated application process, which is ideal and convenient for households who qualify for both programs. However, the two programs have slightly different eligibility requirements, and using one consolidated application process prevents households who are eligible for EUSP but not eligible for MEAP from accessing the EUSP assistance they are rightfully eligible to receive.

The Solution:

This bill will help more Maryland families access utility assistance by requiring DHS to establish a process for Marylanders who are eligible for EUSP, but not eligible for MEAP, to apply for and receive utility assistance from EUSP. By requiring OHEP to establish procedures for households to access EUSP for those who are not eligible for MEAP, this bill ensures struggling households will receive assistance, as intended.

This issue was discussed in the 2021 Session during the ECM discussions about HB606. Then Chairman Davis sent a letter to DHS Secretary Padilla, asking DHS to make this change in DHS regulations. DHS has yet to act on this request, therefore, the General Assembly needs to require DHS to make EUSP widely accessible, as the General Assembly intended when the program was created.

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