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211 Maryland/ United Way Helpline

Oral Testimony in Support of SB 846

Home Energy Assistance – Critical Medical Needs Program – Power to the People Pilot Program

Senate Finance Committee

March 9, 2021

Thank you, Chair Kelley, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Karen Marc. I am the Director of Operations with 211 Maryland United Way Helpline.

211 Maryland/ United Way Helpline strongly supports SB 846, which allows the Power to the People Pilot program to reduce barriers for critical medically ill individuals. This bill will expand the reach for those seeking assistance for home energy programs.

211 is a number people can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days in the year, in over 150 languages, and speak to a live person when facing a crisis and need help. There are four 211 call centers in Maryland. The largest call center is operated by United Way and serves the Central Maryland region, including Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and Howard Counties. Last year we fielded over 132,590 calls from Maryland residents in need. Between last year and this year, our callers requesting medically related assistance such as COVID test sites, and public health information increased 95%. The governor dedicated 211 as the number to call statewide on Covid-19 resources and the governor's declarations. With that, we saw the most significant increase in need surrounding medical, food, housing, and utilities for Marylanders.

In the many years that I have worked with 211 Maryland, I have received thousands of calls in which this bill would have been beneficial. Like the grandmother who contacted 211 because she had fallen behind on rent and utilities. She has been working from home as her office building had closed due to COVID-19. Her son is incarcerated, and his two children were now living with her. They arrived without any change of clothing, and she has been caring for their needs out of her pocket. She has a medical disability and is doing her best to care for her needs and the children. Her food and utilities have gone up, including making unexpected purchases like a computer to help with remote learning for the children. She was no longer able to meet her expenses due to these additional expenses. She contacted programs for help, but no assistance was found. Some were not open due to COVID-19. Without help, she faced eviction once the courts reopened and a BGE shut off. If she could get help, she would be able to meet expenses in the future.

All of our staff at 211 have a background in social work or counseling. We are also certified by the

Alliance for Information and Referral Services (AIRS), which is the highest certification available for information and referral providers in the human services industry. We are primed to take on the role of default navigator for those with critical medical needs.

SB 846 will allow 211 Maryland United Way Helpline to expand their role when speaking to callers like this grandmother to get help now. We can help reduce the stress that many people face while dealing with a crisis. 211 Maryland United Way Helpline will not only help close the gap of those in need over the phone and in-person but connect them to other resources that your constituents faced, such as food and housing stabilization that has increased due to COVID-19.

On behalf of 211 Maryland United Way Helpline, I strongly encourage the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 846. Thank you for your time and consideration.