



HB 138 SUPPORT

Department of Human Services - Electric Universal Service Program - Eligibility

Economic Matters Committee

January 20th, 2022

Dear Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and Members of the Economic Matters Committee:

On behalf of CASA, and its more than 100,000 members residing in the state of Maryland, we would like to express our full **support for HB 138** as it seeks to make critically needed improvements to the eligibility criteria of the Electric Universal Service Program.

CASA is the Mid-Atlantic region's foremost immigrant advocacy and services organization, annually providing over 20,000 Maryland residents with a variety of services in employment, education, legal, health and social services case management and navigation. As a membership based organization, it is our member leaders who determine what service and advocacy priorities the organization should take on, and as a result of the difficulties and inequities experienced during the pandemic, equitable access to government programs is among our highest priorities.

Through its public benefits navigation work, CASA encounters hundreds of Maryland families annually that have experienced significant challenges affording their public utilities. Many, in an effort to maintain access to their utilities must go into significant debt, using expensive credit cards or pay day loans with exorbitant interest rates as tools to pay their utility arrears and maintain power to heat their homes in the winter. Such desperate acts often only address the short term crisis but over time serve to facilitate a more rapid descent into chronic debt and entry into the crushing cycle of long term poverty. Often these families have already undertaken such steps prior to coming to CASA for counseling assistance. What is often frustrating for our case managers is the fact many of these families may easily qualify for utility assistance which would help save them from these crises, if not for one qualifying criteria dictated by the Federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program – requiring all applicants to provide a Social Security Number for all

members of the family. This one requirement, prohibits access to such resources for certain tax paying Marylanders despite their ability to qualify according to all other criteria.

This inequity should be given greater attention and priority in light of what we have learned from the COVID pandemic. We now know that communities of color and specifically immigrant communities, which are largely those impacted by these restrictions, were among the hardest hit by the pandemic, suffering a disproportionately higher rate of infection, death and related economic disruption as compared to many other communities in the state. In order to ensure an equitable social, health and economic recovery in our state, we must address these structural impediments that prevent all from access benefits equitably and thriving in our economy.

We believe HB 138, which will allow the Department of Human Services to unlink all qualifying criteria for the Electric Universal Service Program from those determined by the Federal LIHEAP Program, will allow our state to adequately address these disparities and determine equitably how eligibility for our own state program should be determined.

We urge a favorable report on HB 138.

Respectfully,



George Escobar

Chief of Programs and Services