



Senate Bill 883

Environment - Water Utilities - Shutoff Protections (Water Access for All Protection Act)

March 15, 2023

SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

My name is Michael J. Wilson. I am the Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to end hunger in Maryland by improving participation in the federal nutrition programs. Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports Senate Bill 883, which would prevent Maryland water utilities from shutting off a customer's water service due to nonpayment or overdue bills, if the customer suffers from a significant medical condition, earns 50% or less of the median income, is an older adult (65+), or has a physical, cognitive, or medical disability. HB 883 would also prohibit the sale of a customer's home solely to enforce a lien imposed for unpaid water, sewer, or sanitary system charges except in certain circumstances.

Maryland Hunger Solutions' on-the-ground experience as an authorized Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach agency for the state of Maryland has given us a unique perspective on this issue. In recent months, an increasing number of Maryland residents applying for SNAP have also expressed a need for assistance with household bills including electricity, heat, and water. This reflects a rise in inflation, stagnant wages, and the end of pandemic-era expansions of benefit programs including cuts to housing assistance and the end of SNAP emergency allotments. When households are forced to spend more money on rent and food, there is less to spend on utility costs.

For the Maryland residents who will be impacted by this legislation, having their water shut off could pose a threat to their health and safety. We therefore strongly support SB 883, to provide a way for these residents to maintain their water supply even when they may not be able to pay their water bill. In addition to the populations currently included in the bill, we would recommend the inclusion of parents and caregivers of infants who are formula-fed. Consistent access to clean water is crucial for the health and wellbeing of infants receiving formula.

Should SB 883 pass, we would encourage the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) to authorize and fund state and local outreach organizations to provide assistance to eligible residents who have received a warning from their water utility of an impending shut off. Community organizations could be a crucial resource to provide assistance to residents to prevent shut offs and address serious water service issues.

In conclusion, Maryland Hunger Solutions urges a favorable report for SB 883. Thank you for your consideration of this submission.