

Maryland Office of People's Counsel
IMPORTANT ALERT
OHEP Energy Assistance Applications
Gas Arrearage Retirement Assistance (GARA)
Is Available

Background

OHEP launched the Gas Arrearage Retirement Assistance (GARA) program in July 2018. The eligibility criteria for GARA are the same as the EUSP (electric) arrearage benefit criteria. The applicant:

- Must have a qualified gas arrearage from the gas utility at the time of application
- May not receive more than \$2000 once in every 7 year period
- Must receive MEAP (LIHEAP) benefits
- Must be the gas utility account holder

Important Notes for FY2019 only:

GARA exception for the “point in time” OHEP applications. OHEP will permit customers to apply for the GARA after submitting an assistance application, without meeting the PIT criteria. This is important, since some customers were given forms without the GARA program in the early weeks of FY 2019. In other cases, agency employees and customers may not have understood the availability of the new benefit. Please share this information with your staff and clients, so the customers do not lose out on an important benefit.

Delay in posting of committed GARA benefits to utility accounts has been resolved. Due to certain electronic transfer glitches, committed GARA funds were not necessarily transferred to the relevant utility at the same

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time as the MEAP grant. This has been corrected, so that all committed funds should be posted to the utility account as of today, and there should be no delays with future transfers.

What to Do If the Customer Has Applied for and Received energy assistance benefits, but not GARA, in FY 2019: The customer should contact his or her local agency by email, mail or phone and state that they have received energy assistance for this fiscal year, but would like to be screened for GARA. The local agency will verify the customer's eligible gas arrearage balance, and communicate the status of the benefit processing as soon as possible.

What to Consider When Applying for GARA: The agency should confirm that the balance is a gas, not an electric, balance (BGE specifically). Also, as with all arrearage assistance, it is important to keep in mind that there is a "1 in 7 years" limit on arrearage applications; if the arrearage is only for a few hundred dollars and there are other resources available, the customer may want to use those, in case there is a future crisis requiring a larger GARA benefit.

Note: For current applications, the GARA benefit should be applied to the account *before* the MEAP bill assistance benefit.

Reminder: OPC updated its City and County Resource Guides. Please visit our website at www.opc.maryland.gov to view or download a copy of the Guide for your area. We encourage you to share this with other organizations and agencies that work with households in need in your communities.

If you would like a PDF or hard copy of the guide, please send an e-mail at despina.sarioglou@maryland.gov , or call 410-767-8150 (1-800-207-4055) and ask to speak with Despina.

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