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June 1, 2020

EMAIL DELIVERY

The Honorable Benjamin Cardin
509 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

**Re: Maryland Congressional Support to Assist Residential Utility Consumers
Affected by the COVID-19 Health and Financial Crisis**

Dear Senator Cardin:

I am writing to you as the statutory representative of Maryland's residential customers of the utilities and companies regulated by the Maryland Public Service Commission. The Office of People's Counsel (OPC) acts as an advocate regarding services, reliability, affordability and other issues of great importance to Maryland residential utility customers across the State. On behalf of the households we represent, I wish to express my appreciation for the bill assistance that Congress provided to low-income utility customers in the prior COVID-19 stimulus bills.

The problem of energy affordability is not a new one. However, the economic dislocations and job losses resulting from the pandemic have intensified those concerns. The novel coronavirus has resulted in both health and financial crises, and a threat to maintenance of electricity, gas, water, phone and internet services. These services are essential to all households at any time, but even more so during this health crisis. Governor Hogan took early action to protect access to these services when he issued Executive Orders prohibiting utility, phone and internet service disconnections during the State of Emergency, and extending to July 1, 2020. Many utility and communication companies also voluntarily suspended service disconnections. However, even if the moratoriums are extended, we know that the problems of income loss and bill payments will continue through 2020 and beyond, and pose a threat to maintaining utility services. Senior citizens, seriously ill and immune-compromised people, and low-income and newly unemployed residents will be at risk as result the COVID-19 situation. Loss of

utility services also poses a health and safety risk to our communities. While the novel coronavirus has affected areas of the State differently, it is present in every corner of the State. Income loss has affected all areas, including cities, towns, the suburbs of metro areas, and the rural portions of Southern and Western Maryland and the Eastern Shore. In the face of this health and financial crisis, it is imperative that essential utility services are maintained.

The Office of People's Counsel is a member of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA), and I am a past President. NASUCA recently adopted a resolution that sets forth a set of policy priorities to help consumers of utility and communications services during this COVID-19 crisis and address longer-term policy and funding priorities. With the passage of this resolution, NASUCA sent a letter to the Congressional Senate and House Leadership setting forth the concerns of NASUCA members. The letter highlights the policy priorities that would benefit from federal action during this crisis, while not interfering with existing state authority and decision-making. In particular, the resolution identifies the following areas where federal assistance is both appropriate and necessary to address these priorities:

- Utility Bill Assistance:
 - Additional Funding for LIHEAP and other bill assistance mechanisms
 - Extension of bill assistance eligibility and criteria to the newly unemployed and reduced-income customers, similar to the unemployment benefits expansion
- Low-Income Assistance for Water and Wastewater Consumers
- Low-Income Assistance for Telecommunications Consumers
- Broadband, Telephone and Cable: Funding and incentives for expansion of broadband communications networks, with a focus on unserved and underserved areas
- Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Funding

Utility bill assistance support is the immediate priority. Funding assistance would help households maintain essential services, benefit public health and safety, stabilize revenues for utilities and lessen the need for future utility rate increases as consumers try to get back on track in their lives. Since mid-March, the unpaid or partially paid bills have accumulated due to loss of income. Unemployment benefits have been delayed significantly due to the unprecedented number of applications. Both past due and current bills will need to be addressed during and after the immediate crisis. Even with the additional COVID-19 stimulus funds, a sizable increase in applicants and arrearages likely will exceed the current capacity of the State programs administered by the State Department of Human Services' Office of Home Energy Programs.

On behalf of Maryland's residential utility customers, I ask that you consider these policy priorities to address the health and financial emergencies caused by this COVID-19 crisis. It is imperative that, as a nation and a State, access to essential utility services is maintained during the health emergency and the financial difficulties that will extend past 2020.

I have attached the NASUCA Resolution and the NASUCA letter to Congressional leadership for your consideration. In addition, please know that our agency continues to provide information on Maryland utility services, bill assistance and other resources, and related matters at www.opc.maryland.gov, and offer information and assistance to individual consumers.

Sincerely,

/s/ Paula M. Carmody

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Attachments