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**BILL NO.:** House Bill 323 - Social Services Programs - Eligibility and Enrollment

**COMMITTEE:** Economic Matters

**HEARING DATE:** February 16, 2023

**SPONSOR:** Delegate Charkoudian

**POSITION:** Favorable

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The Office of People's Counsel strongly supports HB 323. The bill streamlines the process for signing up for safety-net services such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and energy assistance while lessening administrative burdens for State agencies.

Under current law, Marylanders who are eligible for safety-net services must complete and renew annually multiple applications. Those applications are reviewed by different agencies, slowing down an already stressed system. To prove eligibility, the applications ask similar questions and require many of the same documents. This duplication creates an unnecessary burden for households who are struggling to make ends meet, often resulting in our most vulnerable community members losing or not receiving access to important and necessary benefits.

HB 323 simplifies the application process by requiring the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) to automatically enroll in any fuel and utility assistance program those individuals who meet the financial eligibility requirements established for SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or means-tested Veterans Affairs benefits.

HB 323 also changes the OHEP income guidelines for the Electric Universal Service Program (EUSP) from 175% of federal poverty level (FPL) to 200% FPL to

match other assistance programs offered by the Department of Human Services. Increasing income guidelines for EUSP creates categorical eligibility for program enrollment so that households who are eligible for SNAP, TANF, SSI, or means-tested veteran benefits are automatically enrolled into energy assistance. By establishing categorical eligibility, one application process allows an individual to enroll in all services.

HB323 will increase EUSP participation, bringing down energy burdens for low-income households, and it will decrease the administrative costs associated with processing duplicative applications for safety-net programs.

**Recommendation:** OPC requests a favorable Committee report on HB 323.