



## L.E.G. Alert

### *Legislative Education Group (L.E.G.)*

SERVING MARYLAND'S VULNERABLE POPULATIONS FOR OVER 30 YEARS

April 2009

## **KEEP THE LIGHTS ON!**

Dear L.E.G. Member:

We know that this Holy Week finds many of you very busy with home and church, but we send this with hope that you will see it and take time to respond right away. The General Assembly session is over in just four days, and your last-minute support can make a difference!

We write asking you to **support HB 1002** that would limit the authority of a gas or electric utility to shut off service to a residential customer who is having trouble paying the utility bill. HB 1002 would direct the Public Service Commission (PSC) to establish regulations requiring gas and electric companies to offer *alternative payment plans* for *all* residential customers, regardless of their income, if they are facing a service shut-off for the first time in a given calendar year. The bill's title is **HB 1002: Public Service Companies – Gas and Electric Service – Alternative Payment Agreement**.

### ***Background:***

- Alternative payment agreements allow customers who have fallen behind on their utility bills to keep their service on while gradually paying off the amount they owe.
- Currently, utilities are required by regulation to offer alternative payment plans only to low-income customers who are receiving State energy assistance (*which requires an income below \$38,588 for a household of four people*).
- Many low-income Marylanders do not receive energy assistance, and thus are not eligible for an alternative payment plan to help them manage their past-due bill. In addition, people who do qualify can experience delays in receiving assistance, because the State is receiving more applications than ever. Finally, people who do not qualify for State energy assistance, but are still struggling financially, are not entitled to an alternative payment plan.
- The gas and electric companies *may* offer a plan to these customers, but most do not.

### ***HB 1002 Would Require:***

- Regulations that say a utility company must offer an alternative payment agreement to all residential customers, regardless of income, if they are facing a shut off for the first time in a given calendar year.
- A payment plan that allows present and future continuation of service, ensures the minimum level of service needed to maintain life, health and safety, and encourages full repayment over time.

### ***Why Support HB 1002?***

- More people than ever are struggling to pay their utility bills, because home energy costs are rising, and people are facing reduced hours at work, layoffs, and other financial stresses.
- Maintaining utility service is critical to health and safety. For example, it allows people to escape extreme temperatures, as well as preserve and prepare food safely. For people who rely on medical equipment, power is necessary to survive. Utility service is often a condition of the lease on rental properties.
- HB 1002 would eliminate any doubt that the PSC can require gas and electric companies to offer alternative payment plans to **all** residential customers to help avoid shut-offs.

## ***What YOU can do to HELP...***

### **Send an Email**

Call, or email a brief note to the legislator from your jurisdiction on the Senate Finance Committee (*see list with emails at end of this alert*). This needs **immediate** action, because the Committee will likely vote before Monday, April, 13.

If your legislator does not serve on the Finance Committee, please send a note to the Chairperson:

The Honorable Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton  
Chair, Senate Finance Committee  
[thomas.mclain.middleton@senate.state.md.us](mailto:thomas.mclain.middleton@senate.state.md.us)

To find who your legislators, go to <http://mlis.state.md.us/> and click "Find" a legislator.

Due to the growing number of customers falling behind on their utility bills, reasonable and flexible alternative payment plans will be essential. They can help people keep their gas and electric service turned on, as well as help resolve their past due bills during these very stressful and difficult economic times. Reasonable payment plans will also ensure that utilities receive regular payments to reduce the amount they are owed.

We have a very short time frame to support this legislation and help "keep the lights on" for Maryland residents struggling to pay their home energy bills. A family struggling to pay the bills should not be placed in dangerous or potentially deadly living conditions. A chance at an alternative payment plan — made possible with this legislation — will make a big difference!

Thank you for your willingness to speak out quickly!

A sample message is enclosed on the following page.

Sincerely,



Sister Joan Marie Stief  
Sr. Joan Marie Stief, OSB  
L.E.G. Coordinator  
Parish Social Ministry

*"Everyone has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and, finally, the necessary social services."*

*~ Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII*

# S A M P L E " A L E R T " E M A I L

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**RE: SUPPORT of HB 1002: Public Service Companies – Termination of Electric and Gas and Electric Service – Alternative Payment Agreements**

Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_ OR Chairman Middleton:

As a Maryland resident who cares about the health and safety of Marylanders, I support HB 1002.

With home energy costs rising and more Marylanders struggling to pay their bills, more people are at risk of having their gas and electric service shut-off because on non-payment. HB 1002 would direct the Public Service Commission (PSC) to establish regulations requiring gas and electric companies to offer alternative payment plans for all residential customers, regardless of their income, if they are facing a shut off for the first time in a given calendar year.

The bill would help hard-working people who do not qualify for energy assistance but are still struggling financially. It would keep power "on" so people can escape extreme temperatures, prepare and preserve food, and even, in some cases, operate life-sustaining medical equipment. Alternative payments plans help people pay off the amount they owe while continuing to live safely in their homes.

I urge you to vote **FOR HB 1002**.

Thank you for considering my views.

Sincerely,

Your Name  
Your Address

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# S A M P L E " A L E R T " L E T T E R

# Senate Finance Committee

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Chair: The Honorable Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton  
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