October 25, 2020

Advance Written Answers Prepared for Hearing of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Commission on October 27, 2020

**Maryland Legal Aid**

Douglas Nivens

1. What housing/utility-related assistance can your organization provide?

Maryland Legal Aid is non-profit law firm for people who are low-income. We offer a broad range of services, including legal advice, brief legal assistance, information and referrals, community education, and representation in litigation. We often provide legal representation in cases that involve unlawful evictions, unsafe or dangerous housing conditions, denial of income assistance from federal and state agencies, and resolving subsidized housing problems.

1. What are the main eligibility criteria?

Before Maryland Legal Aid assist any person, we must verify income, family size, assets, citizenship status, and other information. We do not accept criminal, personal injury, or traffic court matters. United States citizens, lawful permanent residents and certain other categories of immigrants are eligible for our services. Citizenship status is kept confidential and will not be reported to any government agencies. We do not handle immigration matters.

1. How can residents apply for assistance?

Maryland Legal Aid does not provide financial assistance to our clients. We work with other social service organizations and charities to refer potential client.

1. How much funding do you have for this program?

N/A

1. What outreach/education efforts have you made recently to connect with City residents and how have those outreach efforts navigated the digital divide?

We have ongoing community outreach efforts throughout Baltimore City. Our attorneys frequently offer brief legal counseling in underserved neighborhoods and communities. Our attorneys are also involved with giving Tenant Know-Your-Rights presentations with libraries, local nonprofits, and tenant unions.

1. What are the main obstacles to residents obtaining assistance and how could those obstacles be addressed?

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we and other organizations and agencies deliver services. While our offices are open to the public, many agencies are still closed. Those closed doors limit the ability for residents without access to a computer or phone to get much needed financial assistance. We, along with other tenant advocates, are spreading the word about resources available to tenants who need help paying rent. However, most needs to be done. We need to provide residents a safe and efficient way to apply for benefits in person as well as utilize other community partners to send applications for rental assistance to the City Government.

**Office of People’s Counsel**

Brandi Nieland

1. What housing/utility-related assistance can your organization provide?

The Maryland Office of People’s Counsel, sometimes known as OPC, is a State of Maryland agency, yet works independently to represent the interests of Maryland’s residential utility consumers. We work to give voice to, and look out for, the best interests of consumers of electric, natural gas, telecommunications, and private water. OPC represents the interests of residential utility consumers before the Public Service Commission, federal regulatory agencies, and the courts. Every day OPC’s staff members address issues affecting the cost, quality, and reliability of utility services in our state, as well as consumer protection issues related to retail energy suppliers. OPC functions primarily as a consumer law office, although we do not represent individuals in cases. As such, OPC’s advocacy touches the lives of every resident in Maryland.

OPC also has a Consumer Assistance Unit in which we provide advocacy services to eligible individuals to help solve disputes with their utilities, educate consumers about their rights, and answer questions about complex utility situations. The Consumer Assistance Unit provides outreach and training to organizations on a variety of utility consumer rights issues and utility topics. We also publish informational materials to our website to be used by residential utility consumers. These documents can be found at [www.opc.maryland.gov](http://www.opc.maryland.gov). OPC also responds to individual or agency questions related to utility services, rates and bills, and retail energy suppliers, and provides direct assistance with bill payment issues in limited circumstances.

1. What are the main eligibility criteria?

The Office of People’s Counsel does not represent individual customers, but serves the interests of all residential utility consumers in Maryland.

1. How can residents apply for assistance?

OPC does not administer assistance grants, but we do work with agencies and organizations that do provide that assistance. To reach out to the Office of People’s Counsel to discuss a complex utility matter you can connect with us through our email DLinfo\_OPC@maryland.gov or call us at 410-767-8150.

1. How much funding do you have for this program?

We do not provide financial assistance. We do work with DHCD OHEP, the Fuel Fund and other agencies on assistance programs, and advocate before the Public Service Commission on issues affecting low-income and payment distressed customers.

1. What outreach/education efforts have you made recently to connect with City residents and how have those outreach efforts navigated the digital divide?

During these unprecedented times during this pandemic, utility service has become more important than ever. In our efforts to respond to these emerging needs OPC has worked to reach everyone, not just those with access to technology. We assist residential consumers over the phone to navigate complex utility situations. During these phone consultations we work with people to provide negotiation assistance, to understand their billing situation, and to link them with other resources. In order to spread our reach across the state we connect with a network of frontline organizations by providing free tools and training to help their clients as it relates to utility assistance and consumer protections. This outreach has included creating educational materials, offering trainings, and developing partnerships. Beginning in September 2020, we have been participating in remote Utility Bill Clinics in partnership with Maryland Volunteer Lawyer Services and the Pro Bono Resource Center. OPC also has teamed up with several wide-reaching non-profit organizations who deliver food and meals to some of our most vulnerable community members to help distribute information about different ways they can keep up with their energy bills.

1. What are the main obstacles to residents obtaining assistance and how could those obstacles be addressed?

The obstacles around the state vary based on individual circumstance. For those who are newly underemployed or unemployed as a result of the pandemic, they may not be familiar with the resources and support available to them to help pay their energy bills. For households who are familiar with assistance programs, they may be struggling to figure out how to apply if they cannot go in to agency offices. As we enter the winter season and there is a continual need for remote work and learning, energy bills will grow at rates many families are not equipped to deal with. OPC will continue to act as an advocate for the best interests of all residential utility customers in Maryland.

**Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service**

Amy Hennen

1. What housing/utility-related assistance can your organization provide?

Utility bill clinics (partnered with Pro Bono Resource Center (PBRC) and Office of People's Council) by phone. Also full representation for ongoing matters.

1. What are the main eligibility criteria?

Anyone can get advice through the clinics, but it's geared toward low-income folks. Full rep guidelines are here: <https://mvlslaw.org/get-legal-help/do-i-qualify/>

1. How can residents apply for assistance?

Clinics: call our partner PBRC at 443-703-3052 to sign up. Full rep: Call our intake Mon-Thurs 9 am to 12 pm(410) 547-6537 or apply online: <https://mvlslaw.org/get-legal-help/apply-for-services/>

1. How much funding do you have for this program?

Just advice & counsel, no funds available, though we do help connect people to water discount programs and LIHEAP funds

1. What outreach/education efforts have you made recently to connect with City residents and how have those outreach efforts navigated the digital divide?

Postcards in with food pickup locations and in courthouses, outreach to community partners, particularly those working with older adults

1. What are the main obstacles to residents obtaining assistance and how could those obstacles be addressed?

We have many available slots with the clinic and we're not reaching everyone who needs the help. We're open to suggestions.

**Baltimore Community Action Partnership**

Angela Whitaker

1. What housing/utility-related assistance can your organization provide?

Currently, we are assisting with back rent delinquencies related to COVID-19, beginning March 1. This is Phase 2 of the City’s Eviction Prevention Program and we will eventually be assisting with relocation services as well during Phase 3 which will occur in January.

1. What are the main eligibility criteria?

From tenants, we require a copy of the lease, IDs for all adults on the lease, and a certified statement of COVID impact. From landlords, we are requesting W9 form, rent ledger, and a grant agreement for any unlicensed units.

1. How can residents apply for assistance?

Our application web link should go live on November 2nd but residents can call 410-545-0900. They should ask to speak with a Human Service Worker and they can have an application either emailed or mailed to them.

1. How much funding do you have for this program?

Phase 2 is funded for 10 million dollars.

1. What outreach/education efforts have you made recently to connect with City residents and how have those outreach efforts navigated the digital divide?

We received our initial group of interested tenants through inquiries from our bmorechildren.com website. Our organization has also done media interviews, hosted respondents’ conferences, and partnered with local landlords. We plan an official launch on November 2 and our Communications Team is crafting a plan to target social media as well as more grassroots efforts.

1. What are the main obstacles to residents obtaining assistance and how could those obstacles be addressed?

Our organization has noted the difficulties that immigrant communities in the City could encounter when seeking assistance so we are working to partner with local Community Based Organizations to assist with completing applications.

**United Way of Maryland/211**

Scott Gottbreht

1. What housing/utility-related assistance can your organization provide?

Up to 2 months of rent, mortgage or utility assistance

1. What are the main eligibility criteria?

Have a mortgage or formal lease arrangement; be able to demonstrate loss of income due to COVID (exceptions can be made to this requirement). Incomes below 50% AMI. No citizenship requirement.

1. How can residents apply for assistance?

Residents are referred to the program by 211 or partner agencies

1. How much funding do you have for this program?

About $50,000

1. What outreach/education efforts have you made recently to connect with City residents and how have those outreach efforts navigated the digital divide?

Our program is not publicly promoted but rather is for callers or referrals who are having trouble receiving assistance through mainstream government programs. Regarding the digital divide, we have made it so that 211 can complete the application for people over the phone.

1. What are the main obstacles to residents obtaining assistance and how could those obstacles be addressed?

We are short-staffed for this program at present but hope to have this addressed soon. Applications for the program are temporarily on hold while we work to bring on new staff, likely by mid-November. Another obstacle we have faced is slowness of landlords to respond to our requests for documents, such as ledgers, W9s, or Grant Agreement Letters (EFSP Rent/Mortgage Form).