

ASSEMBLY TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND UTILITIES  
COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 5994

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY**

DATED: DECEMBER 6, 2021

The Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 5994.

As reported, this bill requires the Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs (commissioner), in consultation with the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (BPU), to establish the “Household Water Assistance Program” (program). The purpose of the program is to provide affordability assistance for water, sewer, and stormwater utility services, to eligible households throughout New Jersey. Under the bill, “eligible households” means a household regardless of the federal immigration status of the members of the household that meets certain requirements.

The bill provides that the program is to provide several types of financial assistance enumerated in the bill. The bill provides that the commissioner is required to coordinate the program with any existing assistance programs and in developing the program, the commissioner will consider adapting elements of one or more existing low-income energy assistance programs, including the Universal Service Fund and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

The bill establishes a “Household Water Assistance Advisory Group” (advisory group) to advise the commissioner in the development of the program. The advisory group is to include representatives of several entities, to be appointed by the Governor, pursuant to the bill.

The bill provides that in administering the program, the commissioner is required to consult and coordinate with the BPU and the advisory group to develop and publish performance metrics that are disaggregated by utility name, type of water service provided, municipality, and zip code, which are to include enrollment levels water shutoffs for inability to pay, and on-time payment levels. The bill provides that the commissioner is to be required to consult, coordinate, and collaborate with the advisory group on certain matters.

The bill requires the commissioner to annually adopt an expenditure plan for assistance to be provided under the program through the “Water Rate Assistance Fund” (fund) created pursuant to the bill. The fund would be a non-lapsing fund to contain monies appropriated annually by the Legislature, federal and other grants

received by the State, and any other monies made available to fund the water affordability assistance required to be provided in the bill.

The bill provides that no later than one year after the enactment of this bill, the BPU is to be required to establish a mechanism for public utilities that provide electric or natural gas services to regularly share data with the department regarding customers currently enrolled in low-income energy assistance programs. Additionally, the commissioner may enter into agreements with municipal public utilities that provide electric or natural gas service, for the purposes of regularly sharing data with the department regarding utility customers enrolled in, or eligible to be enrolled in, affordability programs benefiting low-income households. The BPU and the commissioner are to be required to ensure that the data shared and collected under the bill would be subject to existing confidentiality protections provided under State law.

The bill would appropriate \$75 million to the fund for the purpose of administering the program from the funds provided to the State by the United States government under the “American Rescue Plan Act of 2021,” Pub.L. 117-2.