

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2012 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 1263
Economic Matters

(Delegate Kramer, *et al.*)

Senior Call-Check Service Program - Establishment

This bill establishes a Senior Call-Check Service Program within the Public Service Commission (PSC) for State residents at least 65 years old. PSC, in consultation with the Maryland Department of Aging and the Department of State Police, must adopt regulations to implement the program. PSC may adopt regulations to limit subscriber eligibility to individuals meeting specified criteria that generally relate to income. At the direction of PSC, a telephone company with more than 10,000 subscribers must offer an automated or live telephone call at a regularly scheduled time each day to eligible subscribers, at no cost to the subscribers. If the eligible subscriber does not answer the call, the company must make an additional call to notify a relative. If no relative has been named by the subscriber, or the relative does not answer the call, the company must make an additional call to local law enforcement. Local law enforcement may report to the residence or take other action. A telephone company may coordinate with another entity that provides senior call-check service to an eligible subscriber. PSC may also adjust service rates to account for increased costs to the telephone company. Finally, all program participants are immune from liability for the performance or nonperformance of the service provided.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill's requirements can be met with existing budgeted resources.

Local Effect: The bill is not anticipated to materially affect local operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: Minimal or none.

Analysis

Current Law: “Telephone company” means a public service company that owns telephone lines to receive, transmit, or communicate telephone or teletype communications; or leases, licenses, or sells telephone or teletype communications. A telephone company does not include a cellular service provider.

PSC may adopt reasonable regulations as it deems necessary to carry out relevant provisions of law. In regulating telecommunications, PSC reviews tariff filings and rate revisions, requires telephone companies to meet or exceed specified service standards, and regulates the intrastate services of long distance companies. If a telecommunications regulation results in unreasonable hardship to a utility or to a customer, an application may be made to PSC for the modification of the regulation, or for temporary or permanent exemption from its requirements.

Background: PSC regulates gas, electric, telephone, water, sewage disposal, and certain passenger transportation companies doing business in Maryland. PSC is authorized to hear and decide matters relating to (1) rate adjustments; (2) applications to exercise or abandon franchises; (3) approval of issuance of securities; (4) promulgation of new rules and regulations; and (5) quality of utility and common carrier service. PSC sets utility rates, collects and maintains records and reports of public service companies, reviews plans for service, inspects equipment, audits financial records, handles consumer complaints, and promulgates and enforces rules and regulations.

A number of organizations in the State provide volunteer call-check services for senior citizens in their communities. Counties with at least one organization include Anne Arundel, Carroll, Garrett, Montgomery, Somerset, Washington, and Wicomico. In addition, the Prince George’s County Department of Family Services operates a Telephone Reassurance Plan which calls homebound and isolated seniors within the county. The program operates Monday through Friday and is staffed by volunteers. Commercial call-check services are also available for a monthly fee between \$25 and \$40.

There are approximately 717,000 Maryland residents over the age of 65. Nationally, approximately 44% of those over 65 live alone, while 9.5% live at or below the federal poverty line. Assuming national statistics are representative of Maryland seniors, and a similar distribution of residency status among all income types, approximately 30,000 seniors live alone and at or below the federal poverty line in the State.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: SB 458 (Senator Kelley) - Finance.

Information Source(s): Towns of Bel Air and Leonardtown; City of Salisbury; Carroll, Cecil, Harford, Montgomery, Prince George's, and St. Mary's counties; Department of State Police; Maryland Department of Aging; Office of People's Counsel; Public Service Commission; Medicare.gov; Callingcare.com; U.S. Census Bureau; New York State Assembly; Department of Legislative Services

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