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Chairman Lawrence, Chairman Berry and Members of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee,

The Office of the Public Advocate (“OPA”) submits the following response to questions raised throughout the public hearing of LD 143, “An Act To Make the Arrearage Management Program Permanent.” Please feel free to ask our office for any additional information or follow-up on the Arrearage Management Program (AMP) throughout the work session.

A question was posed by Representative Berry that asked what changes could be made to improve the AMP. In fact, as a result of the frequently referenced 2018 report provided by the Public Utilities Commission a number of significant changes were made to AMP through LD 1848. It was clear that participants would benefit from additional support in order for the program to be successful. Enhanced measures implemented through LD 1848 allowed program participants access to more support measures such as monthly financial counseling with the local community action agency and additional targeted offerings through Efficiency Maine Trust. We have not had an opportunity to examine the true impacts of these changes. Please keep that in mind when reviewing the Commission’s 2018 report as we are hopeful that the additional support provided by the Community Action Agencies and Efficiency Maine Trust will improve participant performance and bill payment behavior.

We have an active and engaged stakeholder group involved with the AMP and would welcome any suggestions the Committee could offer to improve the program. I would suggest that the changes made should not necessarily be tied to the percentage of participants who successfully complete AMP. The percentage of customers completing AMP should not be the barometer for success. This program is supporting the most vulnerable in our society. Any amount of debt forgiveness is a benefit and a win. Obviously, we would like to have 100% AMP completion, but no one could have predicted the impact of the pandemic on household incomes and these households can't predict the next major expense to hit their account.

Representative Foster asked about customer outcome comparing those who participated in AMP with those who did not. Currently the utilities are tracking customers for a full year after their participation in AMP to track payment behavior before and after participation. Regarding energy efficiencies, we think that additional data collection would be useful to see how successful AMP has been in its goal to reduce the electricity consumption within these households. One additional measure that we would offer for consideration would be to begin direct, out-bound calls to review energy usage with the homes and provide targeted education. While it is difficult to quantify a cost-benefit equation typically associated with measures offered by the Trust, we know that education and awareness can have a meaningful impact on usage. Ideally there might even be a site visit, though that might be cost-prohibitive. Connected with other offerings, EMT has launched a tremendous new program that allows contractors to review work done in a home remotely through a video link. Perhaps they could transition that model over to AMP households to look for energy using devices.

Maine's Arrearage Management Program is unique. At the time of inception, it was the only program nationwide that partnered energy efficiency measures with debt forgiveness recognizing the high energy burden faced by these households. The goal

is to provide a pathway to disconnection. Reducing energy usage and encouraging on-time payment behavior while forgiving debt is the goal. The partnership with EMT and now the Community Action Agencies makes this truly achievable.

While we have another report due to the Committee next year, the COVID_19 pandemic is going to present a real challenge in data collection and analysis. We think there is value in reviewing and presenting the data, but the Committee needs to be aware that this won't be a clear cut report. I urge you to approve this bill at this time and not wait to try and decipher the data next session.

The OPA would like to thank Representative O'Conner and Representative Kessler for their continued support of AMP in their sponsorship of LD 143.

Thank you for your time, attention and consideration. We strongly support the AMP and the opportunities it provides to low-income households in Maine. The fact that this program carries such a minimal price tag and can be life changing for the participants is hard to ignore.

Respectfully submitted,



Barry J. Hobbins, Public Advocate