

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

March 27, 2023

Chair Marsh, Vice-Chairs Levy and Levy, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 3459 on the behalf of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, one of the leading bodies in drafting the proposed legislation.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, or EMO, is comprised of 15 member denominations and over 500 congregations and faith-based organizations across the state. We aim to serve, support, and advocate for those whose voices are often left unheard. We perform direct services to help meet the needs of marginalized communities across Oregon, in line with our founding beliefs in human dignity. It is our opinion that access to needed heat and electricity to keep one's home safe and healthy is a human right.

At the height of the pandemic, EMO's food pantry was serving the highest rate of community members in the state. A number of those we were serving even told us that they would not be able to pay their utility bills if not for the money they saved receiving groceries from the food pantry.

At EMO, our interactions with vulnerable communities have heightened our awareness of community needs and the problems associated with utility injustice. We thank Representative Hartman for standing with us in recognition of this social justice issue and look forward to continuing discussions with lawmakers, utility companies, and other stakeholders on how to improve utility justice in Oregon in the interim.

HB 3459 works to build off current utility rights efforts to ensure customers' access to heat and electricity even if they do not have sufficient funds. Such protections are necessary as too many families, 20% of households, are faced with the dilemma of paying their heat bill *or* buying sufficient food or medication. This is unacceptable.

Although many of the programs which helped families at the height of the pandemic are winding down, the financial situation of many Oregonians is still precarious. Maintaining the increase of available funds for bill payment assistance through the Oregon Energy Assistance Program is just one step in the right direction toward utility justice. This is a low-cost method that allows Oregonians to effectively care for our neighbors who need it most.

Energy assistance funds is not a mechanism which discourages bill payments. Energy assistance funds is a mechanism which allows already-burdened households the essential good of keeping the heat on.

I strongly urge you to support HB 3459. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Julia Weinand
Climate & Environmental Justice Policy Advocate
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

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