

Testimony of Sandra Mattavous-Frye
People's Counsel for the District of Columbia
Before the Committee on
Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization
On Bill 22-0686
The “Senior Strategic Plan Amendment Act of 2018”

November 2, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Good morning Chairman Bonds and members of the Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization. For the record, I am Sandra Mattavous-Frye, People’s Counsel for the District of Columbia. I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to offer my input on what I believe is critical legislation affecting more than 51,000 heads of households and approximately 85,000 senior residents (65 years+) who make the District of Columbia their home.

First and foremost I want to thank you and Councilmember Todd for your vision in introducing the “Senior Strategic Plan Amendment Act of 2018.” This legislation cites gaps in services to our senior population that warrant attention. As you know on Monday, Mayor Bowser released the Age Friendly Plan:¹ the goal of which is “to ensure that all DC residents are active, connected, healthy, engaged and happy in their environment” with a focus on residents aged 50 and over. Bill 22-0686 outlines proposals to amend the District of Columbia Act on the Aging to require the Office on Aging to develop a comprehensive strategic plan that shall serve as a long-term blueprint for the District and which will provide the basis for actions that will comprehensively address the needs of our senior population.

As People’s Counsel, the statutory advocate for all utility consumers, I share a responsibility to these residents. It is through this prism, that I reviewed the proposed legislation. Accordingly, I will present proposals that enhance the legislation by incorporation of

¹ (<https://agefriendly.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-releases-age-friendly-dc-2023-strategic-plan>)

provisions that will directly address utility issues impacting Seniors. Specifically, I recommend that the plan also include “An assessment of the utility/energy burden faced by District seniors.”

Numerous reports and studies support the conclusion that the economics of aging in place² for our senior clients are often overwhelming, particularly regarding energy bills and telecommunications service. My office routinely works with seniors facing utility bills that are not hundreds, but thousands of dollars.

Energy affordability may be among the greatest threat to seniors’ independence and their ability to thrive as they live in place, especially those living on fixed incomes. The median income in the District has soared past \$82,000, yet, over 1/3rd of District households (107,000) barely earn half that amount (\$49,000) and many of these residents are seniors.³

² <https://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/ppi/liv-com/aging-in-place-2011-full.pdf>
<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/fall13/highlight2.html>
<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/fall13/highlight1.html#title>

³ <http://www.dchealthmatters.org/demographicdata?id=130951§ionId=936>

According to the recent Fisher/Sheehan & Colton “The Home Energy Affordability Gap Report”⁴, an affordability gap has grown in the District for utility consumers with an estimated 27,000 residents spending as much as 30% of their income on energy services alone.

Nationally, utility services are considered “affordable” if bills do not exceed 6% of the average median income for the community.⁵ In the District, that means nearly \$5,000 per year. But for consumers below the median, living in older less efficient housing, that number can quickly exceed 20-30%, or more of their household income. Keep in mind that for many retirees restricted from earning more than \$1,450 per month to maintain their (SSI) benefits, having the income to afford

⁴ Fisher, Sheehan & Colton, Home Energy Affordability Gap, http://www.homeenergyaffordabilitygap.com/01_whatIsHEAG2.html (accessed October 5, 2018).

The Home Energy Affordability Gap 2017 for the District of Columbia, available at Fisher, Sheehan & Colton, Current Year Affordability Gap Data, http://www.homeenergyaffordabilitygap.com/03a_affordabilityData.html (accessed October 5, 2018). A copy of the report is attached.

⁵ For reference, the 2017 federal poverty level for a household of four was around \$25,000. United States Census, Data: Poverty Thresholds, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html> (accessed October 5, 2018).

utility services, or food, or medicines is a constant challenge. For many, aside from rent, the utility services burden is their biggest bill.

OPC has long recognized this need. We have staff dedicated to outreach specifically for seniors. In addition, pursuant to authority set forth in DC Council Bill 21-158, the FY 2016 Budget Support Act of 2015, proposed by you, Chairperson Bonds, OPC assembled a diverse group of senior leaders, non-profit agencies and government service providers into a Low- and Limited Income Seniors Focus Group that met over several months to study and formulate a detailed set of recommendations for meeting the needs of seniors as energy consumers. I have attached OPC's Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign report to my testimony.

The Focus Group's findings include data showing that DC seniors live at a higher rate of poverty than all other residents in every ward, except Ward 7, and that 25% of seniors in Ward 8 live below the poverty line. Citywide, 17.3% of seniors are living below the poverty line while many others are on the fringe, living on very low incomes, and

unfortunately, just out of reach of assistance programs including Residential Aid Discount, Residential Essential Service & Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

The Focus Group report found some challenges: a lack of discounts for low- and limited-income seniors, problems accessing weatherization programs to cut cost by improving their homes' energy efficiency and, lack of a process to identify and help low- and limited-income seniors who need financial assistance to pay their bills.

The report included key recommendations, such as providing advocacy services for low- and limited-income seniors on topics such as new product offerings, offering new discounts for low- and limited-income seniors who have been living in their homes for 20 years or more, or offering a flat rate for utility service to seniors, developing affordable payment plans for seniors who are in arrears on their bills to avoid service disconnection and reconnection fees, and developing a multi-stakeholder process to assist seniors including those with

disabilities to access financial programs before their accounts are in crisis.

I believe the report findings are consistent with and provide support for the goals of Bill 22-0686.

I would be remiss if I did not at least make mention of the challenges many seniors face with telecommunications, which is a fundamental service in modern life. Yet, many seniors struggle to maintain basic home phone services. During the last several months, the OPC Consumer Services Division staff has noted an increasing number of complaints about Verizon's fees, particularly the increased Rights of Way fee. As a result, seniors on fixed or limited incomes who do not qualify for Lifeline benefits find it difficult to make payments for basic phone service.

In closing, the utility cost burden is real for seniors. My consumer services staff wrestle constantly with heart-wrenching cases of seniors who are often suffering alone in their homes facing extremely high utility bills, with no ability to pay. This is not only an issue of rates but

the result of the District's economy outpacing the incomes of older residents who helped to build the city we enjoy today. It is my hope that by calling for focus on this issue we can move collectively to address all of the needs of our senior community. Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

I am available to respond to any questions you may have.