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Testimony of Sen. Eloise Vitelli introducing
**LD 1913, An Act To Review Strategies for Improving Utility Rate
Affordability and To Provide Utility Relief**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology
February 15, 2022

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry, and fellow members of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee, my name is Eloise Vitelli and I represent Senate District 23, which includes all of Sagadahoc County and the town of Dresden in Lincoln County. I am before you today to introduce LD 1913, An Act To Review Strategies for Improving Utility Rate Affordability and To Provide Utility Relief.

We've seen it in the news, heard it from our constituents, and experienced it ourselves: increasing electricity rates are causing immense hardship for many Mainers and Maine's small businesses. And, as usual, working Mainers and their families struggling to make ends meet and Mainers living on fixed incomes, like our seniors, are the most vulnerable. When people in our community are facing the stressful choice of paying their electric bill or paying for other essentials – be it blood pressure medication or a new winter coat for a growing kid – we as leaders in Augusta must act. While there are programs like LIAP designed to provide relief, this winter is showing us that much more needs to be done.

As this committee knows well, Maine's energy landscape is changing to become more modern, more reliable, and more independent, but in the meantime we're still subject to the whims of national and international markets, as the natural gas prices have demonstrated this year. As we work to build better energy infrastructure, it's our responsibility as legislators to keep the wellbeing of Maine's people as our top priority. To that end, this bill aims to provide immediate and tangible assistance to Mainers who are struggling now, while giving us the tools to plan for energy affordability in the future.

This bill has two main parts. One part consists of a relief program, to be created by the Public Utilities Commission, which would provide financial assistance with electric utilities to Mainers in need. The PUC is well positioned to consider what relief is needed given its experience with LIAP and ongoing rulemaking. (I'm grateful the PUC is undertaking that rulemaking and this legislation is not intended to replace or slow that effort.) The bill directs the PUC to structure the program so that it can also help participants address late fees and arrearages with their electric bill, in order to assist the members of our community who are struggling now. The PUC and Efficiency Maine must then work together to educate the public and utilities about this and any other relief programs.

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The second part of this bill is designed to prevent another instance like this year where, with little notice, standard offer electric rates almost doubled. It directs the Public Advocate to convene a stakeholder group charged with identifying methods to ensure that Mainers are able to afford their electricity as the state continues to wean off of fossil fuels and strives to meet its energy goals. These methods may include new rates designs, lowering costs through energy efficiency measures, financial assistance programs and more. The stakeholder group may then make recommendations to this Committee so that we may implement smart policy that works for Maine and Maine people.

In summary, we help the Mainers who need it most with their bills from this winter and we work to find ways to prevent such volatility in rates in the future.

I've begun conversations with the Office of the Public Advocate and the PUC on some possible amendments to improve the bill, and look forward to bringing back any suggested changes ahead of the work session.

As we know all too well, energy policy is complicated. What's not complicated is the fact that Mainers are looking to us for help, in both the short- and long-term. I strongly believe the measures in this bill will provide real relief to those who need it the most. Thank you for your consideration of this bill, and I'm happy to answer any questions at this time.