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SB-1208 Low-income utility customer assistance programs: concurrent application process. (2021-2022)

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Senate Bill No. 1208

CHAPTER 840

An act to add Section 731 to, and to add and repeal Section 910.8 of, the Public Utilities Code, relating to public utilities.

[Approved by Governor September 29, 2022. Filed with Secretary of State September 29, 2022.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SB 1208, Hueso. Low-income utility customer assistance programs: concurrent application process.

Existing law vests the Public Utilities Commission with regulatory authority over public utilities, including gas corporations and electrical corporations. Existing law requires the commission to ensure that an electrical corporation or gas corporation with a commission-approved program to provide discounts based on economic need uses a single application form to enable an applicant to alternatively apply for any assistance program for which the applicant may be eligible.

This bill would require the commission, on or before June 30, 2024, in coordination and consultation with the Department of Community Services and Development and other relevant state agencies that provide low-income electric or gas utility customer assistance programs, to develop a process that enables customers to concurrently apply, or begin to apply, to multiple low-income customer assistance programs, as specified.

Existing law establishes the Low-Income Oversight Board to advise the commission on low-income electric, gas, and water customer issues and to serve as a liaison for the commission to low-income ratepayers and representatives.

The Moore Universal Telephone Service Act establishes the Universal Lifeline Telephone Service program in order to provide low-income households with access to affordable basic residential telephone service. The act requires the program's third-party administrator to verify each subscriber's identity using the personally identifiable information that the administrator has on file.

This bill would require the board, on or before June 30, 2023, to submit a report to the Legislature regarding the opportunity and process for expanding the third-party administrator contract used for the Universal Lifeline Telephone Service program, or establishing a similar new contract, to include water, gas, and electric utility service for purposes of facilitating enrollment between low-income assistance programs, minimizing privacy and data sharing concerns, and expediting eligibility verification processes, as specified.

Under existing law, a violation of the Public Utilities Act or any order, decision, rule, direction, demand, or requirement of the commission is a crime.

Because the above provisions would be part of the act and a violation of a commission action implementing this bill's requirements would be a crime, the bill would impose a state-mandated local program.

The California Constitution requires the state to reimburse local agencies and school districts for certain costs mandated by the state. Statutory provisions establish procedures for making that reimbursement.

This bill would provide that no reimbursement is required by this act for a specified reason.

Vote: majority Appropriation: no Fiscal Committee: yes Local Program: yes

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. (a) It is the intent of the Legislature that this act do all of the following:

- (1) Improve all low-income utility customer assistance program application processes and maximize upfront data sharing in order to reduce outreach and enrollment expenditures and increase participation by eligible individuals and families.
- (2) Maximize the use of existing and future technologies in order to facilitate the outreach and enrollment processes for low-income utility customer assistance programs.
- (3) Coordinate the enrollment process for those programs between agencies and public and private utilities.

(b) It is further the intent of the Legislature that the concurrent application process complement, rather than replace, existing application processes for each of those programs.

SEC. 2. Section 731 is added to the Public Utilities Code, to read:

731. (a) (1) On or before June 30, 2024, the commission, in coordination and consultation with the Department of Community Services and Development and other relevant state agencies that provide low-income electric or gas utility customer assistance programs, shall develop a process that, to the extent possible, enables customers to concurrently apply, or begin to apply, to multiple low-income customer assistance programs using data collected during the original application process, including, but not limited to, all of the following programs:

(A) The California Alternate Rates for Energy (CARE) program described in Section 739.1.

(B) The Family Electric Rate Assistance program described in Section 739.12.

(C) The Energy Savings Assistance program described in Section 2790.

(2) The process developed pursuant to paragraph (1) shall be known as the concurrent application process.

(b) The commission shall work with state agencies, electrical corporations, and gas corporations to notify, to the extent possible, eligible individuals that they have been successfully enrolled or are in the process of being enrolled into other programs.

(c) The concurrent application process shall complement, rather than replace, other application processes.

(d) Before sharing data, an electrical corporation or gas corporation shall receive consent from its low-income applicants to use already-obtained application information to begin the enrollment process for other low-income electric or gas utility customer assistance programs.

SEC. 3. Section 910.8 is added to the Public Utilities Code, to read:

910.8. (a) On or before June 30, 2023, the Low-Income Oversight Board established pursuant to Section 382.1 shall submit a report to the Legislature regarding the opportunity and process for expanding the third-party administrator contract used for the Universal Lifeline Telephone Service (ULTS) program, or establishing a similar new contract, to include water, gas, and electric utility service for purposes of facilitating enrollment between low-income assistance programs, minimizing privacy and data sharing concerns, and expediting eligibility verification processes. The report shall include a recommendation for funding the expansion of the contract or establishment of a new contract.

(b) Pursuant to Section 10231.5 of the Government Code, this section is repealed on January 1, 2027.

SEC. 4. No reimbursement is required by this act pursuant to Section 6 of Article XIII B of the California Constitution because the only costs that may be incurred by a local agency or school district will be incurred because this act creates a new crime or infraction, eliminates a crime or infraction, or changes the penalty for a crime or infraction, within the meaning of Section 17556 of the Government Code, or changes the definition of a crime within the meaning of Section 6 of Article XIII B of the California Constitution.