

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6502

As of February 6, 2018

Title: An act relating to improving housing stability for people with disabilities and seniors by amending eligibility for the essential needs and housing support and the aged, blind, or disabled assistance programs.

Brief Description: Concerning eligibility for the essential needs and housing support and the aged, blind, or disabled assistance programs.

Sponsors: Senators Dhingra, Darneille, Kuderer and Saldaña.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services & Corrections: 1/29/18, 1/30/18 [DPS-WM].
Ways & Means: 2/05/18.

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Expands eligibility for an Essential Needs and Housing Support Program (HEN) referral to individuals who receive Aged, Blind, or Disabled (ABD) assistance.
- Removes the prohibition against HEN assistance for those living with alcohol dependency or substance use disorders.
- Allows persons to receive HEN services and ABD concurrently while awaiting federal supplemental security income benefits (SSI).
- Requires the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to share data of HEN-eligible individuals with the Department of Commerce (Commerce).
- Requires Commerce to share basic contact information about HEN-eligible individuals with essential needs and housing support entities.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 6502 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Signed by Senators Darneille, Chair; Dhingra, Vice Chair; O'Ban, Ranking Member; Carlyle, Frockt and Miloscia.

Staff: Brandon Popovac (786-7465)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Maria Hovde (786-7474)

Background: HEN Program. HEN was created by the Legislature in 2011. It provides access to essential needs items and potential housing assistance for low-income adults who are unable to work for at least 90 days due to a physical or mental incapacity and are ineligible for ABD cash assistance. Commerce is required to distribute funds for HEN through designated essential needs and housing support entities. HEN may provide assistance for: limited rent and utilities, personal health and hygiene items, cleaning supplies, and transportation. Eligibility for a referral to HEN is determined by DSHS. Eligibility for the receipt of HEN services is determined by Commerce. Individuals who are unemployable due to alcohol or drug addiction are not eligible for HEN services.

ABD Program. ABD was established by the Legislature in 2011. ABD is a successor program to the General Assistance and Disability Lifeline programs. Under ABD, DSHS provides cash assistance to eligible low-income adults who are age 65 or older, blind, or determined likely to meet SSI disability criteria based on a physical or mental impairment that is expected to last at least 12 consecutive months. Currently, the maximum monthly grant amount is \$197 for a single person. A person is not eligible for ABD if there has been a final determination that the person is not eligible for federal SSI.

Summary of Bill (First Substitute): HEN referral eligibility is expanded to individuals who receive ABD assistance. Individuals who are unemployable primarily due to alcohol or drug addiction are also eligible for HEN services.

Persons are authorized to receive HEN and ABD concurrently while awaiting federal SSI benefits.

DSHS must share data of HEN-eligible individuals with Commerce. Commerce must share basic contact information about HEN-eligible individuals with essential needs and housing support entities.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS COMMITTEE (First Substitute): The criteria of being homeless or at risk of losing stable housing or housing support services for a recipient of ABD benefits to be eligible for a referral to the HEN program is removed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill (Human Services & Corrections):

The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard. PRO: Current eligibility rules between both ABD and HEN programs create barriers for people to achieve stable housing. Both programs provide a necessary lifeline for those individuals with disabilities and seniors living on less than \$339 per month. Housing vouchers are provided under the HEN program despite a checkered rental history or credit issues. The transfer between HEN and ABD programs is not seamless since individuals receiving HEN services would lose services once switched over to ABD and awaiting SSI benefits. A seamless transition between programs would prevent individuals from resorting to living on the street or couch surfing. The state would be refunded for both HEN and ABD as a result of the application process. The bill should have a very modest fiscal impact for each department to administer changes, but a technical amendment is still needed to reduce the fiscal note.

Both programs are a crucial part of the state's behavioral health system. Authorizing individuals in substance abuse treatment programs to access housing through the HEN program would reinstate a part of the former General Assistance-U program. Currently, 75 percent of ABD referrals and 80 percent of HEN referrals have an identified mental health need. The bill would allow individuals with substance use disorders to stay sheltered while participating in treatment programs. Losing HEN services may cause those with mental health issues to backslide.

About 8000 persons under the HEN program and 20,000 persons under the ABD program are served monthly. Poor communication exists at the state agency level, in which individuals are unaware of eligibility under either program. Services under both programs would be streamlined since DSHS would be required to share information about HEN-eligible individuals.

Persons Testifying (Human Services & Corrections): PRO: Senator Manka Dhingra, Prime Sponsor; Kate Baber, Washington Low Income Housing Alliance; David Hlebain, Statewide Poverty Action Network; Carl Schroeder, Association of Washington Cities; Nicholas Arndt, citizen; Danielle Caldwell, Solid Ground; Christine Cossley, Catholic Community Services of Western Washington.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Human Services & Corrections): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on First Substitute (Ways & Means): PRO: This bill provides a more strategic way to leverage existing resources to reduce homelessness among people with disabilities. When clients from HEN have a short-term disability that becomes long-term, they lose their housing assistance and are transferred to ABD while they apply for federal SSI benefits. During this time, many are at risk of becoming homeless on the \$197 per month cash grant. Homelessness is costly and emergency room visits and incarceration can be avoided simply by having a home. Mental health issues can be addressed in a timelier manner when people are not living on the streets and currently 75 percent of ABD clients and 80 percent of HEN referrals have an identifiable mental health need. Allowing individuals on ABD to be eligible for HEN referrals is a more cost effective

method of reducing homelessness for individuals with disabilities. This bill does not seek an increase in resources for housing assistance. The fiscal note for the substitute should be reduced for DSHS. People are more successful in treatment if they have stable housing and, as a result, we expect a return to the state in improved treatment outcomes because individuals will have access to housing.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: David Hlebain, Statewide Poverty Action Network; Kate Baber, Washington Low Income Housing Alliance.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.