

HB 2667 (Macri) and SB 6502 (Dhingra): 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.

Overview:

This bill seeks to improve housing stability for people with disabilities and seniors within appropriated resources by making technical changes to the eligibility rules for the Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) and Aged, Blind, or Disabled (ABD) programs. Together, HEN and ABD create a critical housing and basic need lifeline for people with disabilities. Per DSHS, 74.7% of ABD recipients and 80.7% of HEN referrals had a mental health treatment need from SFY 2015 to SFY 2016. Current eligibility rules are creating unnecessary barriers to stable housing for people receiving assistance through these programs. The changes outlined below will remove these barriers and will result in improved housing outcomes within existing resources.

Changes Proposed in Bill:

1. Prevent people with disabilities from experiencing homelessness when their disability status changes from temporary to permanent.

People with temporary physical and mental health disabilities are successfully moving from homelessness to stable housing through HEN assistance. DSHS regularly reassesses HEN recipients' disability status, and if people's disabilities become permanent, then they are transferred to ABD while they apply to the federal SSI program. The ABD cash grant is funded at \$197 per month, and the transfer from HEN to ABD often results in a significant reduction of housing resources, which puts people at high risk of losing their housing and experiencing homelessness. This bill seeks to fix this problem by changing HEN and ABD eligibility rules to allow people to continue receiving HEN assistance (within available resources) when their disability becomes permanent.

2. Improve housing stability for people with permanent physical and mental health disabilities and seniors.

People who receive ABD assistance struggle to afford housing on the \$197 per month cash grant unless they are living in affordable housing where they pay no more than 30% of their income for rent or are living in shared housing with family or roommates. This bill would improve housing stability by changing eligibility rules to allow ABD recipients who are either experiencing homelessness or are at substantial risk of losing their housing to be eligible for housing assistance through the HEN program within available resources.

3. Allow people whose primary disability is a substance use disorder to be eligible for housing assistance.

Prior to the creation of the HEN program in 2011, people with substance use disorders were eligible to receive assistance through the General Assistance Unemployable (GAU) program while participating in treatment (GAU was HEN's predecessor). It is well established that stable housing is a critical resource needed to support people's recovery from a substance use disorder. This bill changes HEN eligibility rules back to the long time policy under GAU and allows people with substance use disorders who are participating in treatment to be eligible for HEN housing assistance within available resources. Per RCW 74.04.805, people are not eligible for HEN if they fail without good cause to participate in drug or alcohol treatment if an assessment by a certified chemical dependency counselor indicates a need for such treatment. This bill does not propose to change this requirement.

4. Improve outreach to people who are eligible for HEN assistance.

DSHS determines if an individual meets the income and disability eligibility requirements for the HEN program. People who are eligible for HEN are provided with a referral to be assessed for a housing need and eligibility for housing assistance by a HEN provider. However, DSHS is not able to share eligible clients' name and contact information with the Department of Commerce or subcontracted HEN providers. This prevents HEN providers from conducting outreach to people who are eligible for housing assistance (many of whom are experiencing homelessness). This bill requires DSHS to share basic contact information with Commerce and HEN providers so that HEN providers can conduct outreach, and more people who are eligible for the program are able to find HEN providers and enroll in housing assistance within available resources.