

S4548 Sign On Utility access

September
Hon. Kathy Hochul
Governor
State of New York
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224
Re: Utility Data Matching S.4548/A.4876

Dear Governor Hochul,

We the undersigned organizations, nonprofits, and community-based organizations write today to thank you for all of your efforts to address the utility arrears crisis in New York, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Your extraordinary efforts to mitigate this crisis have made a significant impact and set a new precedent in New York.

Our organizations believe you have another important opportunity to keep struggling New Yorkers from falling behind on their bills again and provide them with benefits for which they qualify but are not receiving.

We respectively ask for approval of S.4548 (Parker) same as A.4876 (Solages) to employ data matching to ensure that eligible low-income New Yorkers are enrolled in utility benefits programs that they may not know about – or may be unable to enroll in on their own due to often complicated application processes.

This bill would streamline the benefits application process and make it more efficient overall by requiring utility companies and the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to share data with each other about utility consumers who are eligible for utility-run Energy Assistance Programs (EAPs).

These programs are a critical resource for New Yorkers who are already struggling financially to keep their utilities running while addressing their other basic needs. Coordination between OTDA, New York's electric and natural gas utility companies' assistance programs and other financial assistance programs statewide would ensure that low-income individuals receive the highest level of assistance to which they are entitled.

The high cost of energy in New York is taking a toll on all New Yorkers, particularly low-income households and older New Yorkers living on fixed incomes. Costs continue to rise, and people continue to struggle to pay for their basic needs, including rent, utilities, food and medicine. Public assistance programs are meant to alleviate some of these financial burdens for eligible households, but low enrollment rates indicate that far too many New Yorkers are not receiving these benefits. Lack

of awareness and lengthy application processes and requirements contribute to low enrollment; S.4548 (Parker) same as A.4876 (Solages) addresses these factors.

EAPs decrease monthly utility bills for low-income households. At last count, 1,032,772 residents are collecting benefits from the Home Energy Affordability Program (HEAP); most are households with a senior, a child under 6, or a person with a disability. But more than twice that number—2,251,793—are eligible for the program, leaving an astonishing 54%, or 1,219,021 persons, eligible but not receiving benefits.^[1] If the 1,219,021 persons eligible but not receiving benefits were enrolled in the program, the State would bring in an estimated \$591 million in federal aid based on the average HEAP benefit of \$485 per year.

The New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) utilizes a file matching process to enroll customers in other qualifying programs automatically. This helps qualified individuals benefit from programs without applying for them all individually. Outside New York City, customers are responsible for either receiving HEAP or finding and determining eligibility for programs independently, limiting the number of benefits they receive.

For the reasons detailed in this letter, our organizations respectfully request your signature and support of S.4548 (Parker) same as A.4876 (Solages).

Sincerely,

^[1] Ghilarducci, T. *New York's Data-Matching Problem Leaves NY Economy Short \$4.4 Billion and Struggling Older Adults Without \$2.5B in Federal Aid*. Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis. (2023)