

BILL ANALYSIS

S.B. 1976
By: Whitmire
State Affairs
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Interested parties contend that recent legislation did not provide electric providers and certified telecommunications utilities who want to offer assistance to low-income customers with a mechanism to verify the income of applicants to the assistance programs. S.B. 1976 seeks to address this issue by providing for the development of an automatic process for the identification of low-income customers to retail electric providers and certified telecommunications utilities.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

S.B. 1976 amends the Utilities Code to remove the requirement that the Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUC) by rule provide for an integrated eligibility process for customer service discounts, including discounts under statutory provisions relating to the system benefit fund and relating to lifeline service. The bill instead requires the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), on request of the PUC, to assist in developing an automatic process for identifying low-income customers to retail electric providers and certificated telecommunications utilities to enable those providers and utilities to offer customer service, discounts, bill payment assistance, or other methods of assistance. The bill requires the PUC and HHSC to continue the memorandum of understanding entered into by those agencies in effect on January 1, 2017, that establishes the respective duties of those agencies in relation to the automatic process and authorizes the PUC and HHSC to amend the memorandum of understanding as necessary to achieve the goals of the bill. The bill prohibits the PUC from requiring a retail electric provider or a certificated telecommunications utility to offer customer service, discounts, bill payment assistance, targeted bill messaging, or other benefits for which the provider or utility is not reimbursed. The bill prohibits the PUC from submitting a request to HHSC to provide for a process to identify low-income electric customers for a fiscal year unless the PUC receives a request from one or more retail electric providers not later than July 31 of the previous fiscal year for a list of low-income electric customers to be developed and each retail electric provider that submits such a request to the PUC agrees to reimburse the PUC for the cost of development of the list on terms agreed to by the PUC and the provider.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2017.