

SENATE BILL NO. 2362
(First Reprint)

To the Senate:

Pursuant to Article V, Section I, Paragraph 14 of the New Jersey Constitution, I herewith return for Senate Bill No. 2362 (First Reprint) with my recommendations for reconsideration.

State and federal energy assistance programs provide invaluable resources to residents struggling to make utility payments. These programs are especially critical during the Coronavirus disease 2019 ("COVID-19") pandemic, as many New Jerseyans have seen their incomes decline and their energy costs rise as a result of working and learning from home. The Department of Community Affairs administers the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, the Lifeline Utility Assistance Program, and the Universal Service Fund assistance program to provide assistance to eligible low-income residents who are experiencing a variety of financial hardships. The Payment Assistance for Gas & Electric program, awarded by the Board of Public Utilities, is yet another resource available to low and moderate-income families experiencing difficulty paying their utility bills.

Recognizing the critical need for additional assistance for residents impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, my Administration committed an additional \$15 million from the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund to further assist those low-income residents eligible for the Universal Service Fund program who are facing financial hardships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, in order to ensure that all residents have uninterrupted access to heat, power, and clean water as we enter the winter months, I issued Executive Order No. 190 (2020) last month, which prohibits utility companies from disconnecting gas, electric, and water utility services until March 15, 2021.

This bill would appropriate \$5 million from the Universal Service Fund to the NJSHARES - S.M.A.R.T. program, a low-to-moderate income assistance program, in order to provide financial assistance to New Jersey residents who suffered financial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic to further help them pay their utility bills. During these times of unprecedented challenges, I fully support directing utility assistance to homeowners and tenants directly impacted by the pandemic. However, in order for the funding to be made available as intended, I am recommending a technical revision to update the supplemental appropriation to apply to the current Fiscal Year 2021, rather than Fiscal Year 2020, which expired on September 30, 2020.

Therefore, I herewith return Senate Bill No. 2362 (First Reprint) and recommend that it be amended as follows:

<u>Page 2, Title, Line 3:</u>	Delete "2020" and insert "2021"
<u>Page 2, Title, Line 4:</u>	Delete "June 30, 2019 (P.L.2019, c.150)" and insert "September 29, 2020 (P.L.2020, c.97)"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 9:</u>	Delete "P.L.2019," and insert "P.L.2020, c.97,"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 10:</u>	Delete in its entirety
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 11:</u>	Delete "c.43 to the contrary,

[seal]

Respectfully,

/s/ Philip D. Murphy

Governor

Attest:

/s/ Parimal Garg

Chief Counsel to the Governor