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HOUSE BILL NO. 2136**AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE**

(Proposed by the House Committee on Labor and Commerce
on January 23, 2025)

(Patron Prior to Substitute—Delegate Keys-Gamarra)

A BILL to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 56-6.1, relating to Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman; established.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 56-6.1 as follows:

§ 56-6.1. Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman established; responsibilities.

A. As used in this section:

"Public utility" has the same meaning as provided in § 56-232 except that "public utility" includes any chilled water air-conditioning cooperative serving residences in less than a one square mile area.

"Residential customer" includes any association as defined by § 54.1-2345.

B. The Commission shall establish the Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman. The Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman shall protect the interests of residential customers of public utilities. The Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman shall serve (i) residential customers of public utilities that are nonjurisdictional or of limited jurisdiction and (ii) residential customers who cannot be assisted by other Commission staff due to a potential conflict of interest. Other Commission staff, except for cases where there is a potential conflict of interest, and all state agencies shall assist and cooperate with the Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman in the performance of its duties under this section.

C. The Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman shall:

1. Receive, review, and attempt to resolve any complaints from residential customers regarding public utilities;

2. Assist residential customers in understanding their rights and responsibilities under the terms of any agreement with a public utility;

3. Assist residential customers who are facing a cessation of service due to the dissolution of a public utility;

4. Assist residential customers who are facing a potential enforcement action initiated by the Commission or Commission staff;

5. In conjunction with complaint and inquiry data maintained by the Commission or by a public utility, maintain data on inquiries received, the types of assistance requested, any actions taken, and the disposition of each such matter;

6. Assist residential customers in using the procedures and processes available to them through their public utility or the Commission;

7. Ensure that residential customers have access to the services provided through the Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman and that the residential customers receive timely responses from the representatives of the Office of the Public Utility Ombudsman to the inquiries; and

8. Carry out activities as the Commission determines to be appropriate.