

Low Income Utility Assistance Workgroup Meeting Minutes

July 21, 2022

10am-11:30pm

Google Meet joining info

Video call link: <https://meet.google.com/pez-rgax-tnx>

Or dial: (US) +1 443-408-8589 PIN: 437 392 503#

More phone numbers: <https://tel.meet/pez-rgax-tnx?pin=8222720919817>

Attendance

- Brandi Nieland
- Cindy Carter
- Del. Lorig
Charkoudian
- Jake Oslander
- Jennifer Walczyk
- Katherine Natafgi
- Laurel Pelteir
- Lauren Molineaux
- Lisa Smith
- Nicola Tran
- Robert Durocher
- Ronni McTier
- Sam Quist
- Sen. Malcolm
Augustine
- Shanise Smith
- Vivek Chandroth

Agenda

- I. Introductions
 - Approval of the minutes
 - Minutes from 6/23/22 meeting approved without objections
- II. Presentation from OPC
 - Part of an on-going, broader discussion of eligibility.
 - Raising from 175% of FPL to 200% of FPL. Without lowering EUSP benefits.
 - Categorical eligibility would play a role in increasing access as well.
 - Assumes that participation percentages would stay the same and benefits would also stay the same.
 - \$3 Million would need to be added in order to add 175%-200% benefit level for OHEP Bill Payment
 - Arrearage Retirement benefits would need \$2 Million for an avg benefit of \$1051. Based on existing average benefits.
 - Are current benefit amounts sufficient? OPC has looked at Household Energy Burden as a method of calculating benefits. (6% energy burden is still the ideal)

- One workgroup member inquired about what the analysis would look like in order to get to the 6% energy burden. How much would that cost?
- Work group member Predicted increases in RGGI funds, may be worth noting with the analysis.
 - If this goes to the general assembly, we would need to see more numbers about how this increase would be paid for, and which sources of funding would need to be tapped.
 - OPC expressed concerns about how higher participation levels would affect calculation as a challenge
 - OPC expressed interest in alternative funding outside of collecting from existing rate payers.
- Limited Income mechanism- one option is for utilities to offer a discounted low income rate. With some additional funds coming from utility ratepayers/ shareholders.
- Metrics of EUSP rate-payer funding? Review deregulation historical record.
 - \$37 Million cap on rate payer funds for EUSP (\$27 Million came from commercial ratepayers)
- Administrative savings can be had in categorical eligibility. May offset increases somewhat though difficult to quantify.

III. Voting on application recommendations

- Requirement about Social Security Numbers. Workgroup member wanted to have a policy discussion regarding this requirement.
 - OHEP policy discussion in the next meeting or several.
- Formal recommendations approved by the group.
- Recommendations will be forwarded to the DHS secretary.

IV. Discussion on Outreach and the Energy Assistance Service Model

- OHEP Local Administering agencies submit annual outreach plans for approval by state OHEP. Many LAAs have strategic partnerships with local organizations, assistance networks and a variety of methods for performing outreach.
- Challenges with vulnerable populations online and paper applications. OHEP approach is
 - Current assistance models (outside of OHEP) rely primarily on referrals, rather than hands-on assistance. Workgroup members identified a need for more hands-on assistance for customers completing an application.
 - DSS representatives in hospitals do not wish to participate in OHEP. Say they only work with national programs.
- Suggestion from work group member: inconsistency and duplication of branding and marketing.
 - A workgroup member highlighted that some outreach issues may be due to inconsistent scale and consistency of current marketing practices,

suggesting that more standardization across the state may have a greater impact. Missing opportunities for savings.

a) Should there be a state-wide review of marketing materials? (To ensure consistent clean communication of info about programs).

b) Sub-committee for marketing and outreach recommendations?

(1) Laurel

(2) Ronni McTier

(3) Emory Brown

(4) Cindy Carter

- Decentralized administration seems to be trickling down into marketing and how programs are administered.
- Consistency for customers within utility service territory. Doesn't make sense for customers to receive contradictory info
- One workgroup member recommended customer service agents at LAAs to provide hands-on assistance in completing an application.
- A work-group member mentioned that Energy Assistance is not being mentioned when customers are signing up for other government programs (like SNAP, Dept of Aging)
 - Workgroup member emphasized the need for fewer referrals. More hands-on service.
 - Reactivate old partners and get them to help provide assistance for customers who need a higher touch and more customer service.
- Workgroup to invite MD Hospital Association to another workgroup/ sub-committee meeting for outreach?
 - Workgroup members asked to reach out to LM and SS to sign up for sub-committee.
 - a) To present in September meeting at earliest.

V. Member Discussion

- Upcoming meetings:
 - OHEP policy/ program discussion
 - a) EUSP availability for undocumented customers for OHEP. Part of the concern regarding HB606. Letter from chairman Davis.
 - b) Is a decision that DHS can update. Not statutorily/ legislatively mandated.
 - (1) Other applications that request Social Security numbers?
 - Weatherization

VI. Next Meeting

- August 18, 2022– hybrid in-person and remote meeting.