

March 18, 2020

Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Coronavirus:

The undersigned organizations, representing consumer advocacy organizations, clean energy advocacy organizations, environmental organizations, utilities and others, join the Community Action Partnership of Oregon (CAPO), the State Association for Oregon's Community Action network of 17 Community Action Agencies and Oregon Human Development Corporation (a statewide agency serving farmworkers) - whose agencies collectively serve every Oregon county with federal, state, and local utility assistance – in calling for a significant increase in state energy assistance funds in light of the national emergency posed by the coronavirus and the impacts it will have on Oregon's low-income families.

Currently, energy assistance for qualified low-income households in Oregon is funded by a combination of sources, including federal and utility funding. Federal assistance is largely seasonal and is fully spent every year after cold weather months. State programs, with dollars collected by utilities from their customers, are funded proportionately through the year with monthly distributions. In all, Community Action Agencies provided just over \$60 million in energy assistance benefits statewide in 2019. Unfortunately, in an average year, these programs currently serve only 19% of Oregon's program eligible populations.

As we all now recognize, 2020 will not be an average year. Thankfully, utilities have reacted quickly. Most have already announced that they are suspending disconnections for all customers and will not to charge late fees on overdue bills. In the longer term, however, this will most certainly mean that customer bills will accrue to high levels, high enough that families that are already struggling financially, or those hard hit by the impacts of this virus, will be unable to pay. To assist households with low incomes, particularly those with the lowest incomes that pay a high proportion of household income for home energy, our organizations request additional funding be directed into the Oregon Housing and Community Services budget for additional energy assistance funding statewide. We request allocation of an additional \$30 million from the Oregon legislature to supplement current energy assistance programs.

The national health emergency and the resulting impacts on Oregonians raises the following concerns specific to utility bills and service:

- 1)**Utility Bills will increase because families will be at home using more power** – There will be a major cost shift from companies to employees as homes must be powered during times usually reserved for school and work outside the home.
- 2)**More individuals will qualify for energy assistance as a result of job losses and time off without pay** – Currently, there are over 400,000 program eligible homes in Oregon. With mass layoffs in retail and service industries, CAPO expects that number to double, maybe triple. This will lead to a significant increase in program eligible participants.

3) **There will be no income, or disconnections, during long periods of quarantine** – There could be long periods with current and newly low-income Oregonians unable to make payments on their bills. Homes could accrue large arrearages without the ability to pay.

Oregonians depend upon the essential services provided by our electricity and natural gas services. Low-income customers will need increased resources this year to provide bill payment assistance. We urge you to take action now to ensure reliable, affordable utility services across the state.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and for your prompt attention to the coronavirus crisis.

Sincerely,



Janet Merrell
Executive Director

Supported by:

Portland General Electric

Northwest Natural

Pacific Power

Northwest Energy Coalition

Citizens Utility Board

Verde

Latino Network

Union of Concerned Scientists

Oregon Environmental Council

Community Energy Project