



Oregon's Poverty Fighting Network

May 28, 2020

Memo to: Representative Karin Power, Chair
 Committee Members
 House Energy and Environment Committee

From: Saul Chavez-Hernandez, Rent and Energy Coordinator, Community Action Organization (CAO) and Community Action Partnership of Oregon

RE: Energy Assistance Demands in the time of COVID-19

Chair Power and Committee Members:

My name is Saul Chavez-Hernandez, I work as the Emergency Rent and Energy Assistance Program Manager at the Community Action that serves Washington County. I also serve on the Citizen's Utility Board representing District 1. I am writing to share what Community Action has seen as the impact on the energy expenses of Oregonians due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Action is currently seeing increases in assistance inquires from, not only clients we have served in the past, but now clients who have never needed to seek out these services. This is the first time many of them are having to navigate the systems put in place to access Energy Assistance. Our data shows that the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 are already being felt. For example, we have seen a very large increase in Energy Assistance inquiries in the last two months. Our webpage that contains the Energy Assistance Application request form has had traffic more than double since February of this year. Below is a table showing the number of unduplicated visitors to our Energy Assistance Application request webpage for the last couple of months.

Month	Number of unduplicated visitors
February	421
March	424
April	927
May (as of the 26 th)	1005

The average payment amount we are making has also increased during the same months. Below you will find a table showing the average payment amount that we have made to electric utilities.

Month	Average payment amount
February	\$387.00
March	\$402.00
April	\$457.00
May (as of the 26 th)	\$518.00

As you can see above, the average payment amount we are making to electric utilities has increased by \$131.00 per household since February.

The Oregon residents we speak with repeatedly share the experiences they are going through right now. Many use words such as fear, anxiety, and depression. One example of this is a single mother with a young adult living at home. She was thankful that she was still employed, but her hours had been cut back. Her other son along with his wife and newborn were forced to vacate their apartment due to both losing their jobs and had to move in with her. She relied on alimony paid by her ex-husband to pay the mortgage. However, he is a small business owner that has had big losses in the last two months and is not able to pay her the monthly alimony she relies on.

Another young family reached out to us seeking Energy Assistance two weeks ago. The mother, in her mid-twenties, contacted us from her hospital bed where she was admitted due to being COVID-19 positive. Her husband and two young children were quarantined at home. Both her and her husband were not working also due to the pandemic. They were seeking Energy Assistance as well. They had never received services from us in the past.

Oregonians reaching out to us are reporting total and partial losses of income. Many suffering small business owners are reaching out to us for the first time in their lives seeking help to pay the light bill at home. One reached out to us and reported that even though his small gutter business was still running, it was not earning enough to cover the monthly expenses and the purchase of personal protective equipment. We have also noticed many parents losing or receiving reduced amounts in child support that they depend on.

We have done our best to respond to the needs of the community and individuals while at the same time doing everything we can to ensure our safety and theirs. Our website and email have become essential in applying for Energy Assistance. Where we once would have someone hand us income verification across a desk, many now text pictures of their eligibility paperwork to us. Others still prefer to use mail. These changes have led us to make more staff available to process Energy Assistance Applications.

We are also taking advantage of reduced eligibility guidelines for LIHEAP, OEAP, and OLGA. However, we will continue to seek and advocate for the use and expansion of Categorical Eligibility. These measures would help alleviate most of the documentation burden placed on households and would allow for increased efficiency on the agency side when processing Energy Assistance payments.

We maintain good communication with the utilities and are working with them to help minimize the negative impacts on their customers. Based on our experience, we expect that once disconnections resume we will see Energy Assistance requests from households who are already disconnected or on the verge of disconnection and with very high balances. We will also receive requests from households who have never had to navigate these systems before. As a service delivery provider, we will continue to do our best to serve as many households as efficiently as possible with Energy Assistance funds.