

## Testimony Regarding HB2475 – Energy Equity

### Systemic Issues Continue to Hold Equity Barriers in Place

Thank you for allowing me to offer a brief exploration of systemic issues that will likely impede your effort from having the intended and greatly needed impact. For context, out of many years of professional research, advocacy, documentation and direct services. In particular, I spent seven years working for a Fortune 50, international company doing fully validated, warm handoff resource searches nationwide for EAP and identified struggling clients. I did hundreds of thousands of these searches per year all year round, at pace, with a ZERO allowance for error on the part of my employer. Desperate pleas for energy assistance were a part of every day of searching for our team of 21 able experts. I have had a clear and unrelenting view of the chaotic, underfunded, wildly unprofessional manner in which utility relief is now managed in America.

You mention PGE reports that some one in five of their customers are on some kind of energy assistance. Knowing that US energy assistance does not vaguely meet actual eligible need qualifies this. What is not generally known is that this would be a much greater number if this country had the following: meaningful poverty guidelines, adequate funding on an ongoing and reliable basis, and a competent way of getting funds out to the communities. Very few of the community who actually need this help are getting the help. I'll explain some of the details of those obstacles.

**History:** it is good to look back on politically-oriented systemic changes. Previously, funds were placed in the hands of professional nonprofit casework agencies and government agencies to get the funds into the hands of the people. Professional social work agencies are accustomed to gathering data, providing reports and have an infrastructure that can be customized to assist in documenting those who fall by the wayside unable to get the help they need. During the Bush administration, this was disrupted. George W. Bush created the Office of Faith Based Initiatives and the funds were greatly removed from the management of these professional agencies accustomed to documentation and oversight. Nonprofessional churches and religious entities are now overwhelmingly involved in making decisions as to whether a client is eligible to receive assistance. There are guidelines that are to be followed, but there are ways to meet documentation requisites that can be used to “get the job done” and documented properly in a professional setting. Nonprofessional religious lay people are making decisions as to whether to go the extra mile to establish client eligibility, and there is not safe reporting structure for citizens who many needs assists. ***Validated poverty reporting has been disrupted by this move to deprofessionalize the process of stabilizing the energy-burdened.*** By decentralizing and deprofessionalizing this critical resource transfer process, the Bush Administration successfully further hid poverty from our view, and from our ability to properly characterize and address growing disparities. This extra layer of chaos has made it difficult to trace the continued governmental defunding of energy and utility support funds nationwide. In my work, I found the non-professional agents to be unable to understand why this might matter. As the conversation moves to funding Interveners, it

is important to recognize that Interveners are necessary because of the baked-in nature of America's culture of inequity that is well documented. It is necessary to have an equity partner in this process. But it is also important to require competence of these agents, and notice how cultural inequity is still burdening some people more. I have noticed that typically my own community, Indigenous community, are the last ones to see our programming come online, our teams are the last ones to be hired, trained and activated in collective action overall. We need to look at why that is and address it. We also are a community most likely to share our opportunities with ALL and share our resource to amplify the needs of others. This is integral to our overall culture as Peoples.

**Poverty Guidelines:**

FAMILY SIZE	FPL FOR 2020	FPL FOR 2021
1	\$12,490.00	\$12,760
2	\$16,910.00	\$17,240
3	\$21,330.00	\$21,720
4	\$25,750.00	\$26,200
5	\$30,170.00	\$31,800
6	\$34,590.00	\$37,400
Each Additional Person	add \$4,420 each	add \$5,600 each

So, according to this table, a person with terminal cancer living on \$1,330/mo disability and unable to cover basic bills at the most minimal is not poor enough to be considered for assistance under most poverty standards kept by assistance programs. For a local medical/dental clinic, a person with this unearned income level is required to pay \$60 per dental treatment that simply does not exist. These federal poverty guidelines are and have always been unworkable for the deeply impoverished. A person with that amount of money is eligible for \$13 of SNAP/food benefits. A person with that amount is within \$35 of being denied expanded Medicaid Special Support to help pay for their Medicare coverage, coverage under which they cannot afford their treatment or cancer medications because... funds for copays simply.do.not.exist. The purchase of two private insurance plans is required to make Medicare work for this person too rich for energy support, meaningful medical or dental "poverty access" or meaningful food support. This entangled bowl of suppressive noodles is what a person of modest means endures. I urge you to understand that the various eligibility criteria based on anything other than categorical criteria actively deny help to the very poorest of our poor on a regular basis.

This grid is in desperate need of reality-based change. I ask you to know that this is a future project or agency advocacy task that adheres to these conversations. Should we decide to make a prosocial decision around energy equity, we must be willing to address the rest of the systemic infrastructure that is enforcing the need for us all to courageously sign this bill.

**Ongoing, regular and reliable funding:** in my decades of advocacy work, I have seen the number of funds available to assist with energy cut until nearly nonexistent. Previously, there were a variety of funds that arrived on a regular schedule. It was made clear how to apply, and agencies answered the telephones. Now, funds that came at predictable time tables, allowing planning and structure, now are reported by community agencies as coming unreliably. Month to month, these agencies cannot tell anxious clients what to expect and when to come back. Funds may or may not be available this month or the next. The funds are so scarce they are typically gone within minutes to 1-2 days. Worse, many small religious organizations specialize in funds that leave the door wide open for personal bias and discrimination. I have found churches that require people to attend church to get a chance to apply. This is the truth. I have called well known Christian agencies in parts of the country that require hungry or energy burdened people to attend a sermon before they can eat or apply for help. I've talked to ladies who told me they turn down "those ladies" who come in with nice nails or nice hair because "it's clear to me they don't need it". Clients of mine in Salem have encountered passive aggressive staff at a large local nonprofit agency located in NE who refused to tell them who to call where to access the funds for which they were found eligible. These are common occurrences, and the chaos of this US scheme makes it too risky for a client to try to make a complaint or feedback. I've had clients with low paying jobs forced to take a full day off so as to rapid dial the phone for as much as eleven hours hoping to secure an appointment to apply for assistance. This is not unique. It is a known. I've had clients who had to endure such a telephone extravaganza to get into a lottery after applying. Other funds require the client to prove they only need help the one time and can pay all of their bills from there on out. This is the new mindset of contemporary agencies and social workers: "we will not throw our money away on them. it's better if they lose everything and come to us when they are ready to start fresh" has been told to me by agency caseworkers. The old ethos of doing all we can to help a person stay domiciled is no longer. Case managers are invested in it being better for a client to lose everything and have to start over. Another destituting standard: clients are only allowed to ask for help once a year and for some funds once in a lifetime. The last time I checked Marion county, the only funds offered people who live here are the once a year or once a lifetime funds. And those funds only for the lucky few who get through a malfunctioning phone system with emails that go unanswered. If a person walks up to the door, they may or may not be treated with respect and told what they need to know.

**Competent disbursement:** the manner in which energy assistance is provided is worst practices. Some agencies lack effective means of communicating resource availability and even may feature folks only telling some of the community about opportunities, a lack of full, free and effective broadcast of opportunities. Inside workers have been known to preferentially ensure their own circles are aware and can queue up. In too

many instances, entities such as PGE misrepresent themselves as having ANYTHING to do with assistance and the workers at the phone number are not trained to make proper responses. Too often resource and referral workers hand out defunct listings or listings that do not meet client eligibilities. These agencies typically do not verify their listings, depending, instead, upon agencies alerting them to program changes. The agencies roll their eyes and report years of effort to get their records updated, unsuccessfully. Under no circumstances should PGE be repping themselves as directly involved in energy assistance funds in any way. It fatigues the desperate caller trying to find where the funds are. Generally speaking, phone lines are clogged and go unanswered. Emails are not answered. Offices close their doors against the waves of eligible clients. Crucial agencies such as Social Security are still closed to the public eleven months after pandemic came, unable to pull it together enough to serve the people needing documentation to apply for the help. The picture around utility assistance has been a sheer chaos for decades, and I can only believe now that this is strategic. If we cannot pierce this mess and see just now little is actually being sent to the poorest, we cannot easily convince federal and state legislators to make solutions. If org structures are so devastatingly chaotic, community members cannot make complaints that hold those agencies accountable. It's a real situation, folks.

Decreasing nonprofessional and church involvement and increasing professional casework involvement is the first best solution I can offer. An office with staff, regular hours, a standard of note taking and record keeping and an oversight expectation is the best practice. It means we can again see clearly how little is getting into the hands of those who need. Adding a proviso to this bill that those disbursing funds must also keep verifiable record of those who are prospectively eligible who are turned away due to lack of funds is an important addition to make. Phone contacts that at least include race and income can help to begin understanding just how many are being denied due to scarcity. A reason I say this is because of my knowledge of the fallacies of depending upon the US Census for foundation population data. The census strips ethnic identity from all mixed-race people. Programs seeking to address communities of color cannot rely upon the US Census for this equity aspect.

But first and foremost, if you plot your new energy policy against that Draconian Federal Poverty Guidelines standard shown above, you doom the suffering to continue suffering. You cannot address our need, our real need, using ANY of the instruments and measures you have utilized in the past. Ask us. Listen to us. BELIEVE us. And don't go back and use those tools anyway. They are designed to create this suffering.

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