



NeighborImpact

Supporting People. Strengthening Communities.

2/10/2023

Chair Helm, Vice-Chair Hartman, Vice-Chair Owens, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of NeighborImpact, I would respectfully ask you to support House Bill 3125, which will establish the Public Drinking Water and Sewer Ratepayer Assistance Fund. This fund will provide much needed state financial assistance for water and sewer bill payments to help ensure low-income households have access to safe drinking water.

NeighborImpact represents and serves economically disadvantaged residents of Deschutes, Crook, and Jefferson counties and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Our mission is "Supporting People, Strengthening Communities." We are the area's leading provider of housing and unhoused services; emergency food; energy and weatherization assistance; childcare provider and early childhood education services, financial education, asset building and retention; lending; and rep payee programs. Through the efforts of our 250 employees, NeighborImpact serves more than 50,000 households every year.

In 2022, NeighborImpact received \$612,593 in federal funds to provide financial assistance for low-income families for their drinking water and wastewater bills. In a short amount of time, we have set up 8 contracts with local water and wastewater systems in our community. To date, we have spent \$160,904 assisting 365 families, impacting 890 individuals locally.

Additionally, the City of Bend allocated \$180,000 in ARPA funds for water assistance. This fund allowed us to expand our water assistance program as the income guidelines were higher. Because this fund is almost completely expended, we will now be relying solely on the LIHWA program. We expect the numbers to increase greatly as the need has certainly not decreased in our area.

This is a time where many people are struggling to get back on their feet, looking to manage the mountain of debt that occurred during and after the statewide shutdown. The shutdown was necessary, but its financial and social impacts are going to be felt for years to come. This is not the time to cut assistance for our citizens who are still trying to survive in this post Covid environment. As one client stated: "Thank you all so much I seriously cried for like half an hour and still am in shock. The ongoing utilities bills has been so stressful during the pandemic and lingering after, trying to catch things up has been mentally and financially exhausting. You have no clue what this means to our household. Thank you so much for everything."

House Bill 3125 will build on the hard work undertaken to establish a program to distribute water and sewer bill payment assistance by investing state resources. It would use lessons learned from the federal program and expand access to Oregonians currently ineligible for assistance, including low-income Oregonians living in multi-family dwellings whose utilities are bundled with rent.

I request that you support House Bill 3125 and build on the success of the existing program which has been providing an essential service to many low-income Oregonians.

Thank you,

Patty Wilson
Deputy Executive Director
NeighborImpact