

Low-Income Energy Advisory Board Meeting

Wednesday, August 4, 2021 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM (EDT)

1. Call to Order

Vice Chairperson Wendy Wanchack called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. Remote meeting held via Microsoft Teams.

2. Attendance

Members Present: *Brenda Watson, Wendy Wanchack, Rosemary Lopez, Nora Duncan, Deb Polun, Christian Herb, Nickey Kollie, Joy Hollister, Nora Benson, Tyra Peluso, Frank Augeri, Kathleen Wasilnak, Carlene Taylor, Danielle Palladino, Owen Rood. Nelida Handy,*

Members Absent: *Kenneth Millerd, Ruth Swift, Nicole Lawton, Lisa Temper-Bates, Michael Li*

Host: *Starley Arias, Claire Sickinger*

Guests: *Joanne Whistnant, Lissette Andino, Joanne Balaschak, Gioia Connell, Brittany Wyman, Rose Croog, Elaine Ulrich, Tasha T. Perreault.*

3. Minutes for Approval

Minutes for Wednesday, June 2, 2021

Motion by: Deb Polun

Second by: Kathleen Wasilnak

Abstained: Nelida Handy, Ruth Swift, Lisa Temper-Bates, Nicole Lawton

Opposed by: none

4. Old Business/ Program Updates

LIHEAP/CEAP Update: Carlene Taylor & Linette Pisani

Linette provided an update on the 2021 program Fiscal Year.

- We took in 88,455 applications with a total approval of 72,432.
- The data match process left us behind 1% of the total amount of applications taken and 3.8% behind the applications approved.
- We had set aside \$2 Million for heating system repair replacement which included *clean, tune and test* and mayor minor repairs. It looks like we have expended \$1.9 Million.

Wendy Wanchack: You asked for \$2 Million for the next plan, is that going to be enough?

Linette Pisani: We have not gotten there yet but I believe so.

Wendy Wanchack: There's been a lot of questions lately, among PURA and the LIEAB members regarding the people who apply for energy assistance and don't get it. I think we had ask about trying to determine the reasons and I know that one was income but is there any statistical data that would represent what numbers of people are being denied and for what reasons?

Carlene Taylor: Most people are denied as you said, for over income or other related issues. As Linette mention there were many households denied income, income incomplete and half way through the program we made some adjustment to make it easier for households to be determined eligible. Mostly due in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where households indicated it was difficult to obtain the income information needed to determine their eligibility. So most households are denied because 1. They are over income and 2. In many instances the agencies have reached out to when needed and they have not responded with the information needed to make their application complete.

Wendy Wanchack: Was it deemed that this year was more difficult because there was not as much onsite of interviewing and document exchange because the CAAs were closed?

Carlene Taylor: It was more difficult and that's why we made those adjustments halfway through the programs. The income flexibilities and in addition we did two bulk recertification at DSS, where for income ineligible households a data match was done to see if they were eligible for DSS programs. If they were, they were then categorically determined eligible and the information was provided to the agencies.

Joanne Balaschak: Commented that the CAAs never fully closed and reinforced Carlene's comment on the difficulty of obtaining the information needed and added that the security people felt from the utility moratoriums contributed to issue.

Deb Polun: Commented that part of the issue of verifying the income was getting bank statements, income information from employers and collecting unemployment verification from the Department of Labor. Adding that the flexibility placed by DSS was very helpful.

Tyra Peluso: I believe Carlene had mention that one of the main reasons for the ineligibility was being over income and I am curious as to whether no longer applying the liquid asset test will be approving people that may not be income eligible?

Carlene Taylor: The income eligible still remains at 60% of the State's median income. The asset is part of a separate component and our liquid asset test is very liberal when you come to think of it. At the end of the day you have to be within the income limits and if you are homeowner the liquid asset test will disregard the first \$15,000 and the first \$12,000 if you're a renter, and any amount remaining would be added to your income and you would have to fall within the income guideline. So the 60% of the State's median income was always there as the basic eligibility determination.

Wendy Wanchak: So you're not putting them in the same category as the asset test

Carlene Taylor: We provided some information a couple days ago that discusses what was proposed in the FFY 2022 plan.

Brenda Watson: Just wanted follow up on Tyra's question, did I read correctly that there were under 400 people that were maybe over asset last year out of the thousands of application that came in, and that you may be removing that as policy moving forward?

Carlene Taylor: Yeah, that was one of the proposals. As I just said we have those disregards and we realize not many states have an asset test but there are some states for example if you have \$ 5,000 in the bank you're not going to be determined eligible whether you're income eligible or not. But we had the disregard so you could have up to 15,000 in the bank if you're a homeowner and still be determined

eligible. If you only had 17,000 we would count only the 2,000 towards your income and that would still make you eligible for the program. So our liquid asset test was pretty flexible in allowing some households with some assets to still be eligible for assistance.

Wendy Wanchak: Under the statute Carlene it says when DSS has to pay the utilities the CEAP money prescribed by regulation is this done a quarterly basis?

Carlene Taylor: We pay the standard we have always used in paying the utilities because we do not know when we will receive the official award for the program year. And we usually start the program under continuing resolution and we have to ensure that when the program starts we have enough fund to pay the deliverable fuel vendors. Because if they have not received their funds to pay for previous deliveries they may not make a delivery. So it is always the goal to make sure that the deliverable fuel vendors are kept whole in terms of delivery made to those households. So usually we start paying the vendors by the end of January or early February and then we do monthly payments after that as households become eligible.

Carlene Taylor: I also sent out our weekly report just before the meeting. Our block grant was \$73.5 million. We had some CARES Act money from the previous year totaling \$5.6 million. We have some carry forward (\$3.6 million) and refunds (\$374,000). So we had a total of \$83.25 million in the programs with projected expenditures (\$64.7 million) it leaves a balance of \$18.4 million dollars. We are only allowed to carry over 10% of the block grant allocation which is \$7.3 million. We try not to report that as the full carry over to HHS because if we receive any re-allotment of funds or get any refunds, and we have set the max at \$7.3 million for example any amount over that would have to be returned to HHS. So what we have done is reduce the carry forward for next program year so that we do not have more than 10% of our carry forward. We estimate that we are going to use \$3.5 million in the program for FFY 2022. So that leave 14.9 million that we will have to spend in order not to return to HHS. We are still in the process of making those final decision but just wanted you to be aware that we have some funds that we will be making sure to spend before the end of this program year which ends September 30th. Usually in the past we have done utility supplemental payments and that may be part of the decisions that will be made in terms of making sure those funds are spent.

Lisa Temper-Bates: Is there any opportunity to use some of the funds for outreach? The United Way of Connecticut has been in discussion with the Governor's Office, and the Department of Public Health among others about the fact that a number of existing available benefits are not getting into Connecticut. They're not getting the uptick that we would like to see and it is almost certainly related to awareness as it can be related to the administrative burden of accessing benefits. We will be working on outreach around the child tax credit; around the broadband benefit. So there is a way to potentially collaborate on this.

Carlene Taylor: We allocated funds in the program year that ends this September for outreach. We have included funds for outreach in the FFY 2022 program. There will be further discussion regarding that. Of course the plan has to go the legislative committee of cognizance for review.

Lisa Temper-Bates commented on the importance of knowing what the outreach looks like so that the board could provide additional ideas.

Wendy Wanchak: Could any of the additional funds be used to work on the online CEAP application?

Carlene Taylor: That is probably considered admin. Our intention is to use some of the ARPA funds we have received for software enhancement, online application etc.

Wendy Wanchak: Is there a written proposal for that?

Carlene Taylor: No we are still in the planning stages for that.

Kimberly White: Do you have a timeframe on your planning stages?

Carlene Taylor: Soon, because those are funds under the FFY 2022 program year. We will have to identify who will be taking that, it is still in the planning stages.

Brenda Watson: For a number of years you have been collecting a number of electric bills to study energy burden. Have you done a study yet?

Carlene Taylor: We submit the information to HHS as a requirement for performance measures. We collect the electric consumption per household and primary heat consumption from the top ten fuel delivery vendor. For the past couple of year we have collected the information from the top thirteen vendors. The top 5 for electric, top 5 for gas and propane and kerosene data. We provide the information to HHS and they come up with the information on energy burden.

Linette provided an update on the FY 2022 plan.

- The program deadline dates were changed to May 31st
- The income requirement was changed from 4 weeks consecutively to 4 consecutive weeks within the last 3 months.
- Categorical eligibility change a little since the pandemic to include households who receive state supplement income and social security income.
- We proposed that SNAP level 2 be considered categorically eligible instead of level 4 to be more align with the DSS programs because most of the households that apply for SNAP fall into that income limit.
- The rental assistance threshold has been removed.
- There will be no liquid asset test
- A cooling program is being proposed
- Increased the request for assurance 16 from \$1.8 to \$2 million
- Requested a transfer of \$1 million to DEEP for health and safety measures.
- Proposed an increase in the SNAP from \$20.01 to \$40
- We received \$95 million in American Rescue Act funds for FFY 2022 and have proposed to increase the basic benefits, crisis benefits and safety-net assistance benefit. As well as adding the Level 5 households to the safety-net program.

Joy Hollister expressed concern for subsidized housing that might not be eligible for assistance with the removal of the rental assistance threshold and increase in the number of applicants.

Carlene Taylor: we are proposing that the number of household will increase to about 20,000 households which is about \$8 million dollar. Keeping in mind that we are doing this because the ARPA funds are

available this year. Unless the funding remains this robust there will be some difficult decisions to be made for FFY 2023.

Kimberly White: The only clients that are required to give you income information are those that are not receiving SNAP or one of the other DSS benefits?

Carlene Taylor: Yes!

Wendy Wanchak: There was considerable interest in having a recommendation in the plan to provide DEEP with \$2 million dollars for health and safety issues, which LIHEAP adopted as a recommendation. Can you please explain how you came to this decision?

Carlene Taylor: Yes, it was \$2 million but DEEP requested to reduce it to \$1 million because they did not think they could implement that until early next year. They didn't want to receive it and not be able to spend it.

Claire Sickenger confirmed Carlene's answer in the chat.

Gioia Connell: How was the additional fund for remediation work will be distributed those that are applying?

Carlene Taylor: The funds are being allocated to DEEP as long as they meet LIHEAP requirements. I think that they sent out and RFP regarding those funds.

Wendy Wanchak: The statute requires the board to make recommendation to the general assembly on the LIHEAP block grant and in the past LIHEAP has provided testimony and we are putting this in the bylaws as a required responsibility under those statutes. I think we need to talk about that very quickly on how we are going to do that and I welcome any comments to that.

Daniel Palidino from the Office of Policy Management introduced herself and informed the board that there is no official date yet for a hearing on the plan but that the committees are looking at the week of August 16th.

Lisa Temper-Bates asked what kind of testimony the board is looking for.

Wendy Wanchak stated that it is any testimony but that the board typically votes in favor of the plan. Wendy asked the board to contact her or Brenda Watson if they have any questions or input.

Daniel Palidino informed the board that the hearing will be a virtual format.

Brenda Watson volunteered to read the testimony at the hearing and requested.

Wendy Wanchak asked Carlene on data sharing between DSS and the Utilities.

Carlene Taylor had to defer to the DSS legal department as she has not been a part of the conversation.

Operation Fuel Update: Brenda Watson

We are still in the process of reconciling our numbers it is looking like we served 5363 households last year. Over 1100 came in through our public portal. Our program reopened mid-July. To date we served 288 households. About 70 came in through the portal. We are looking for ways to divert some our funding for more infrastructure related projects so we are going to do our best to refer folks to the CEAP program. We are excited for the program you have and changes that were made to the program.

Matching Payment Program Update:

Eversource: Joanne Whistnant

- Electric Phase 1 MPP: -\$1,400,412.29 with a difference of -\$2,057
- Gas Phase 1 MPP: -\$317,089.17 with a difference of -\$867
- Total Phase 1 of -\$1,717,501.46
- New Start Forgiveness from January 1 to June 30 2021 had a total 9\$9,219,685.07 a difference of \$ 1,947,931.17 from 2020
- Total MPP and New Start Enrollment year to date as of June 30 is 57,343 a difference of 16,910 from last year.

Carlene Taylor: on the number of active MPP program is the number 15,467 for Connecticut electric, all households that signed up for the Eversource MPP? On our program we are reporting that 18,805 electric heated households that applied for CEAP if I add the numbers from UI the total is higher than our report. Are these number reflecting individual that are auto enrolled.

Kathleen Wasilnak: Yes, without knowing how they pulled their number you're right that is total enrolled and some of them may not have come in to you to apply.

Carlene Taylor: Okay! I know that UI has done their enrollment different from Eversource so it's just a concern that the numbers add up.

Joanne Whisnant stated that she would follow up via email.

AVANGRID: Nelida Handy

- Arrearage Forgiveness- MPP: For UI, CNG and SGC we have a total of 24,180 customers with a balance of \$16.9 million
- MaPP Program: UI has 5,660 customers with a balance total of 10.7 million
- COVID-19 Payment Plan: UI, CNG, and SGC we currently have 14,641 with a total balance of \$15.3 million. Out of that 894 are commercial customers.
- At the end of July we ran a mini match and manage to an additional 1,509 customers. 341 are UI, 524 are CNG and 644 are SCG customers that were unsuccessful at the end of phase 1 on May 1st.

Wendy Wanchak: so you matched what payments they had even if they missed some.

Nelida Handy: Yeah, say at the end of phase 1 they were short a payment or two but sent a payment in early june, we captured those individuals in july and went ahead and did a match for them.

Kathleen Wasilnak: That also include some of the late enrollments because DSS had extended the application deadline. So we may have received some late approval who might have failed initially because we had not received the application.

Gannon Long complimented Avangrid for conducting the mini match.

Legislative update: Wendy Wanchack

No update was provided as none of the legislative initiatives made it through the recent session.

PURA Dockets: Frank Augeri

- Energy affordability docket 17-12-03 RE01: We had a technical meeting about the stream lining of the web portal for the utility companies. EOE posted its report July 1st and comments are to the authority by August 26.
- Hearings start tomorrow for Docket # 21-07-01 Matching payment plans for the upcoming season.

Low Income Household Water Assistance Program: Carlene Taylor

- The funding comes out of the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2021 and the American Rescue Act of 2021.
- Total of \$1.1 Billion with a Connecticut allocation of \$9,756,536
- We have until September 2023 to obligate the funds which must be expended by December 2023
- 15% for administration cost
- Plans must be submitted to HHS by August 9.
- 3 categories for how the funds will be used.
 - Restoration of services to household that have had drinking water or waste water services disconnected due to arrearages.
 - Prevention of disconnection for households at risk of disconnection due to arrearages
 - Reduce charges to low income households to help make water service available.
- This program only applies to public water and sewer entities.
- Households with well water or a septic tank do not qualify for the program.

Carlene Taylor: We have had meetings with DEPH that oversees drinking water, DEEP that oversees waste water, PURA that oversees some of the vendor regulations and some of the entities like Connecticut Water Company to develop a program. We are trying to develop a benefit matrix to ensure that households with the lowest income, similar to LIHEAP receive most of the benefits. For priority levels 1 and 2 we have not develop benefit matrix because we will be responding to whether the household does not have service or is in danger of losing service. Level 3 we are developing a priority of basic benefit matrix. Our goal with level 1&2 would be to continue the conversation with the water companies to ensure that service remains in place until negotiations or a payment plan is in place. We are using the same application process that we use for LIHEAP. It would not be a separate application but provide a supplemental form asking for the needed information. You can find more information at www.ct.gov/dss/waterassistance.

Wendy Wanchak expressed that with the pandemic landlords have been placing more of the utility financial burdens on the tenants.

Carlene Taylor agreed and stated that she has received questions from tenants regarding paying a bill that is not in their name.

Gannon Long: does anyone have sense of how far behind people are on their bills?

Carlene Taylor: We have reached out to Connecticut Water Company and got an estimate a range of 100 to thousands of dollars that a residential household owes. There is a survey on the website we provided to get part of that information.

Joy Hollister: Would you be doing the LIWAP in conjunction with H2O program that is offered by Connecticut Water Company? It is basically an arrearage program itself so if someone is on an arrangement could they be in both?

Carlene Taylor: So the program your describing sounds like an agreement between the company and the household so if the household is eligible for LIWAP it would come to how the company wants the client to access assistance.

Wendy Wanchak ask the board if there was anyone that wanted to join the bylaw committee and stated that they are about 90% done and will have a draft for the following meeting.

5. New Business

None

6. Public Comments

None

7. Adjournment

Wendy Wanchak adjourned the meeting. No vote took place

Next meeting date: Wednesday, October 6, 2021