

HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

Thursday, February 3, 2022

A meeting of the Block Grant Advisory Council was held via WebEx on Thursday, February 3rd, 2022. The meeting began at 1:00 pm.

Attendees

Andy Stone, Executive Director, NYS Weatherization Directors Association

Kenneth Gossel, National Fuel Gas

Kira Pospesel, Commissioner, Greene County Social Services

Sue Montgomery-Corey, Chair, HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council

Vivvy Williams, BGAC secretary

Discussion

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Good afternoon everybody and welcome to the Home Energy Assistance Program Block Grant Advisory Council meeting. I'm Sue Montgomery-Corey, I'm the chair of the council and we will introduce ourselves. We have a very small group today but hopefully we'll still get done the business we need to get done. Mr. Gossel will you introduce yourself please?

Ken Gossel: Sure, I'm Ken Gossel, National Fuel Gas in Buffalo.

Vivvy Williams: Vivvy Williams, Secretary for the BGAC.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: And I'm Sue Montgomery-Corey I'm from Essex County New York in the North Country.

Emily Urban: Emily Urban New York State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance Home Energy Assistance Program.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Okay so with that do we have anyone on the phone with us today?

Kira Pospesel: Yes, it's Kira Pospesel from Greene County.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Welcome Kira. Okay so we'll get going. The first item on our agenda for today, this is our first in person meeting in a very, very long time so we're really glad to be able to do that. The first item on the agenda for today is the Regular Component. Emily, do you want to give us an update please?

Emily Urban: Sure. So, we are well into our 2021/2022 LIHEAP heating season. We're still working off of the grant that we got in the Fall. For FFY about \$370 million for FFY 22 allocations. I'm sorry I don't have that number here. So, for our regular benefit component that opened up on October 1st, 2021, so far, we have about 1.4 million benefits. The specifics are about 2 weeks old, January 21st. As compared to the same week last year January 22nd, 2021, we were at 1.2 million benefits. So, we're up on the regular which is great. We do have a tentative closing date of March 15, 2022, for the regular benefit component. If that changes, we will notify everybody on OTDA's website. For our regular, our average benefit is about \$496.

This was mentioned at the last Block Grant, but the Tier 1 add-on was increased by \$10. And then our Tier 1 and Tier 2 heat included benefit, both of those were increased by \$5 each. So, for our heat included, we are up to \$45 for Tier 2 and \$50 for Tier 1. And we still have our \$21 nominal benefit.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: What was the Tier 1 number again?

Emily Urban: Tier 1 is \$50. And then the other base benefits remain the same, we're still at \$675 for oil, kerosene, and propane, \$350 for natural gas or electric heat, \$525 for wood and wood products. So regular is going really well. As I said, regular is up about 200,000 benefits from this time last year. We think that's due in part to the new households applying for RAS households that were not previously known to HEAP do have to apply for regular so if there is a household seeking RAS which is to say Regular Arrears Supplement, they would have to come in and apply for regular benefits. So regular is up, we think it's in part due to that but it's also in part due to opening our benefit a month earlier last year, October 1st. Are there any questions on regular?

Sue Montgomery- Corey: I just did want to make a comment that the opening up earlier is something that this council has really advocated for, for a long time and I know Kira who is on the phone was one of the top advocates for this consistently, and so it's really good to see it paying off and hope that will continue going forward. Ken, do you have any questions, comments?

Ken Gossel: No, I agree it's excellent that we're able to do that. Great to see the benefits up. Timing is important in particular also for utility services because in warm weather typically going into the cold weather you have a dormant review period in things like that and it's helpful to get the HEAP benefit out to get service restored to customers so it's wonderful, hopefully it's something that can continue in the future.

Emily Urban: Yeah, we are going to be assessing that. We're going to be talking to all the districts and assessing whether that's something we will want to continue for next year. The reason we opened up a month earlier last year was because there was a need for it, and we had the funding fortunately to operate the benefit a month earlier. So, we'll take a look at what our funding level is for next year and what the need is and what the feel is out in the districts, but the Block Grant was a huge part of that advocating for the earlier opening so.

Kira Pospel: This is Kira I would like to add thank you very much. It's worked out well and now I think we can really focus on the clients who would really come in for additional benefits really take our energies and look at particular clients.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Kira one of the issues that you had raised with the early opening was the impact on staffing and administrative issues with the districts. How did that play out for you this year?

Kira Pospel: That actually played out well for us. I can't speak about all districts but earlier I was able to get my contracts signed and get that out so as the season went along, and we got more client and colder weather we ended up being able to deliver in a shorter period of time.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Wonderful.

Emily Urban: Yeah, that's great to hear. So, hopefully if we are going to be opening up earlier, we will be able to give the district a little bit more heads up so they can plan for that as well and

make sure they have the appropriate staffing levels to coincide with early outreach and what's needed at program openings.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Great? Are we good with the regular component? Okay.

Emily Urban: So actually, I was also going to touch on the regular arrears supplement which is a subset benefit of our regular benefit component. So, RAS, the Regular Arrears Supplement that opened up on September 22nd, 2021, it is still operating. Our RAS was created to provide benefits of up to \$10,000 to households that have gas or electric utility arrears. For most applicants who received a current year HEAP benefit the application process was really streamlined. Some of those applicants didn't even have to apply for RAS. The districts were able to process those RAS benefits without even talking to some of those people, and that was due to the list that we received from the utilities. It was a great success. We sent about 80,000 records out to the local districts to assess those HEAP recipients for a RAS benefits. So, most of the districts are done with those lists and most of the RAS applicants are now actually coming to the district who have heard about RAS and would like to apply for RAS. So, RAS is going really well. We've given out about 97,000 benefits and just to give an idea of households its approximately 81,000 households after the un-duplication because some households can receive two RAS benefits; one for their gas utility, one for their electric or in some cases and this is just due to system some of the benefits have to be split up into two payments and that was just due to the system. So, that could also cause some duplication in that 97,000. There are about 13,600 pending RAS applications right now so on top of those 97,000 we already gave, there's probably at least 13,000 more to come. We really commend the Social Services Districts for getting these benefits out so quickly and for assisting these households in arrears, it was really a necessary benefit, a lifeline after the moratoriums ended.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: And that's still available to this people?

Emily Urban: That is still open now. When we do close down that benefit it will be when we run out of funding and that date will be posted to our website when that benefit will be closing.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Any changes to the closing on the regular and with this could you please make sure that the Council is advised of this, send us an e-mail so that we know it's happened? That would be really helpful.

Emily Urban: Absolutely.

Ken Gossel: Emily it's a huge number and great program. Do you have the number of dollars paid out to date that's over \$100 million or so isn't it?

Emily Urban: It's over \$150 million. It's up there I don't have the exact figure but it's over \$150 million which is incredible.

Ken Gossel: And was roughly that the budget when we started?

Emily Urban: It was so we're working on running it longer that is all in the works right now.

Ken Gossel: Great thanks.

Emily Urban: So, it's not closing right now.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: So, are we ready to talk about the emergency component?

Emily Urban: Sure. So, emergency opened up on January 3rd, 2022, so about a month ago. So, shortly before the program opened, we increased our emergency benefit so as they were planned for the program year, they were going to be the same as last year but pretty quickly and early on we realized that that just was not enough to meet the need and that was due to the increase heating fuel prices and cold weather outlook for the upcoming heating season. So, we increased our benefits. So, our oil, kerosene, and propane, that old benefit was \$675 we're up to \$965 that was a 43% increase. Wood, wood products that was \$525 that's up to \$700 a 33% increase. Natural gas was \$350 that is up to \$465 also a 33% increase. Electric heat or combined gas and electric heat is \$490 so also 33%. And then the domestic electric that was \$140 and that is up to \$185 so a 32% increase. So, our average emergency benefit right now is \$895 so that shows that most of our emergencies right now are for those larger benefits, the oil, kerosene, and propane, this is up from about \$500 from our average this time last year. It is a little early to really bank on those numbers, but it is showing right now we are doing a deliverable emergency and that's because RAS has taken care of most of the electric and gas utility emergencies. With the regular benefit opening up on October 1st, some of these households, you know that was part of the drawback of opening earlier. With opening up on October 1st, households with the deliverable fuel got their delivery earlier so they were more likely to run out sooner. So, we may be seeing more households in an emergency in January than we would normally see.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: How many households have you see in the last month?

Emily Urban: 14,500 benefits as compared to 7,300 that time last year so pretty significant increase.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Any questions, comments?

Andy Stone: Sue I just want to let you know its Andy Stone I'm on the line.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Hi Andy welcome.

Andy Stone: Sorry I couldn't be there in person.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Okay if there are no other comments or questions on the emergency, we can move onto HERR.

Emily Urban: So, Heating Equipment Repair and Replacement, there is really not much to say about that. We are about the same as we were last year. I think we're about 1,000 benefits for repairs and replacements this year and it was right around the same amount last year. So, right around 1,000. I don't have the breakdown with me of repair vs. replacement.

Kira Pospesel: (Talking on phone but keeps cutting out) so you know trying to _____ all the providers a lot of _____ furnishes probably limits _____. So, if we could know those regulations again it would be appreciated. I'm being told because of the parts components that we're literally driving the price increase.

Emily Urban: Yeah, I hear you. So that was actually in my notes to talk about. So, we're hearing this from a lot of districts that this year the \$6500 maximum for a replacement just isn't enough. And yes, we're hearing the same thing; it's due to increased cost of parts, labor shortages, increase in labor prices, increase in fuels to get back and forth to the job so we are seeing that increase statewide. We're seeing it a lot downstate. One vendor told me to do a replacement for \$6500 wouldn't be safe. Vendors might be getting down to \$6500 in their bids

to get the job, but it wouldn't be done safely. So that was just one vendor's opinion on it. And our maximum repair replacement is only \$4192. So, I don't think that is the majority of households, but we agree, we have to look at the \$6500 maximum because we are seeing more and more bids coming in well over that. We also encourage districts to work with their local weatherization agencies to see if there's any chance for coordination of funds there. Pooling funds together, we always encourage that. Sometimes we're able to go over the limit but we do ask you to try to get creative first, ask the vendors if they can meet our maximum and then try to pool funds from other sources.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Andy do you have any comments or thoughts on all of that?

Andy Stone: No, actually that's pretty good. We always encourage agencies to participate also. And we've had limited success with that.

Emily Urban: I think it's also getting the word out to let districts know that we do allow this, we do encourage this so that both the vendors are aware, especially the vendors that participate in both weatherization and HEAP so that they know that some of these jobs can be split. It does require some coordination on both agencies, but we are more than willing to allow that and encourage that.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Is there any formal communication from OTDA to the weatherization folks and vendors about this that they get regularly? Because if there isn't, there should be something in writing they get that says, "This is a really good idea to do this and here's how you do it."

Emily Urban: Yeah, that's a good idea. We'll take that back. we do meet with the vendors every year before the beginning of the program opening so that would be a good message to send. We wouldn't be reaching all of the weatherization providers...

Sue Montgomery-Corey: But is there a way you could reach all the weatherization providers and all of the vendors?

Emily Urban: Yeah, we have looked at our list before with the weatherization agency to see where the overlap is and we're always trying to work collaboratively with them so coming up with that list and reaching out, yes, that's a great idea to get that message out and to make it more known.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: And the other part of that though is you meet once a year with the vendors and you have contracts with the vendors, there might be something you could put in your contract about coordinating that would strengthen that. But the other part of it is it would seem to me that the people who go to your vendor meetings may not be the person who's handling the bids in the office and that person might not get the message. If you had something in writing that they could stick in their binder or be attached to their contract, that might be helpful.

Emily Urban: Okay, yeah, we'll definitely take that back. Our vendor agreements are always under review for enhancements so that's certainly something we could take into consideration, work with the other weatherization providers to get messaging like that. Yeah, for sure. We also do provide annual training to the local districts to try to make them aware of it. When we train on Heating Equipment Repair and Replacement, we do let the districts know that this is an available resource. But I think again, sometimes we're not reaching the workers to think of this.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: So, the districts could also get a copy of whatever.

Emily Urban: Yeah, no I agree.

Andy Stone: Sue let me chime in, there is also an issue with anyone that receives access to the HERR program and has work done is also supposed to receive a referral to the weatherization program and although that's kind of backwards, it would be very appropriate for whoever the vendor was going to do the install if there's going to be a referral and that home hasn't been weatherized before, we want to make sure that that house is now as energy efficient as possible. But also, we want to make sure that the vendor is installing a heating system that's sized properly for post weatherization.

Emily Urban: Yeah, I agree to get the right unit in there prior to weatherization yeah. I know you were saying kind of backwards, when somebody's out there weatherizing a home unfortunately HEAP dollars can only be used if there is a no-heat emergency so yeah doing it back works, the heat emergency coming first we might not get the right vendor in there, so I hear you on that.

Andy Stone: Yeah, and I mean that's why it works so well to have the weatherization program coordinate it because they would receive the referral for the furnace replacement, and they would weatherize at the same time.

Emily Urban: That's a great point yeah.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Any other questions comments on HERR? Which brings us to the Clean and Tune component.

Emily Urban: So Clean and Tune we're about 1,300 as opposed to 1,000 last year so a little increase but with the benefit being a little small, 300 is a pretty significant. So, our average benefit on a Clean and Tune is \$263. We continue to work with our partner agencies to promote this benefit. I know it's a little bit tough in the districts right now to get vendors to come out and do a clean and tune with all the no heats out there, so we are taking those on a case-by-case basis. As long as the household has heat and they're not in any kind of emergency, we can allow them to wait a little bit for the vendor to go out and do the Clean and Tune as long as it's not too long and the household is willing to wait, or they can find a different vendor to complete the Clean and Tune.

Kira Pospel: This is Kira I would like to add we found this problem actually starting in October so they were busy, basically telling we would have to wait till February. And we know how we're in the midst of emergencies and stuff. Somehow if it's going later or sooner when the weather is nice, I think we're going to get a lot more...

Emily Urban: You cut out a little bit but yeah hopefully we do see Clean and Tune ramp up again as the weather warms up not right now but yeah in the springtime and in the summer when the Clean and Tune should be happening yeah, we do hope to get more households to come and apply for Clean and Tune when the vendors have a little bit more time to complete them. But it's going great so far as far as numbers go.

Sue Montgomery- Corey: Good is there anything in terms of the Clean and Tune and the discussion we just had about figuring out better ways to coordinate so that people can get the Clean and Tune after they get their servicing?

Emily Urban: Yeah, I don't remember the last time we did this, but we do create lists of households who receive repair replacement with HEAP dollars and then we reach out to them the next year. So not the same year because the unit would be too new to be cleaned and tuned less than 12 months. So, once it's been 12 months, we would reach out to that household, send them a letter say, "If you're interested in the Clean and Tune reach out to your local district." Again, I don't remember the last time we did this it might have been a year ago but that's certainly something that we could look into doing again.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: That would be good. Do we know of the 1,300 how many of those are people who were serviced a year ago?

Emily Urban: No, that would be some good data to compare to, but I don't know but we can certainly look into that.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Okay. Any other questions on Clean and Tune, comments? Okay which brings us to the HHS LIHEAP Performance Measures.

Emily Urban: Yep, so performance measures are wrapping up now. We are compiling the report with our IT department. We collected consumer or customer consumption data from the top utility and deliverable vendors. We had 42 vendors last year. We got all of those reports in as of a couple of weeks ago. There were a couple of delays in getting those reports back, but they are all in and right now we're just working on running the report. So, once we run that report we'll be able to get a better idea of how our program was doing, how effective of benefits are and if we're meeting that target of 6% household energy burden, especially for those lowest income households. So, we'll have to report that data to HHS in a few weeks or so.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: And is that something that you could send to the Council once you're submitting to HHS?

Emily Urban: I don't know. I can see if that's something that we can share.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: That would be helpful.

Emily Urban: Yeah, I'm not sure if that's a public report or not but I can certainly look into that.

Ken Gossel: And if any information might be available on the Internet? It may not be but if you could provide let's say a link that would be helpful.

Emily Urban: Yes, there is a link we can share this after the meeting. There is a link to online data. I don't know how recent it is but there are some resources out there.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: That would be great.

Emily Urban: It might just not be completely up to date.

Ken Gossel: Thank you.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Any questions, comments on the Performance Measures?

Ken Gossel: I think it's great that you're getting it and I know you've expanded a number of vendors and it really helps when we see the larger benefits that you're going after those large increases of 33 and 45% which is really great and so its useful information to have.

Emily Urban: It will be really interesting to see the performance measures next year to see the impact that the increase in emergency had even though emergency is a smaller benefit, we don't serve that many households with emergency, but hopefully it will affect the overall energy burden on an average basis.

Ken Gossel: Great, thank you.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Okay, which brings us to Program Coordination and Outreach.

Emily Urban: Alright so we are always working with other agencies to promote HEAP. I actually have a meeting right after this with DOH, so Department of Health is all for the co-promotion of pooling specifically and that's for the health and safety of households with vulnerable members. So, we're going to be doing some joint messaging later this spring to both the Social Services Districts. DOH is going to hop on our calls that we give to the districts and then OTDA will be presenting on calls that DOH is giving to the local health department. So, there is some co-messaging out there from both sides of the fence to promote cooling to get as many benefits out for cooling. Spending for cooling is still \$15 million same as last year, it was increased so we have the money to spend, and we want to serve as many households as we can with those air conditioners.

Kira Pospel: Could I jump in and ask a question?

Emily Urban: Yep.

Kira Pospel: Are you partnered with _____? (cut off)

Emily Urban: What was that?

Kira Pospel: Do you partner with OCFS?

Emily Urban: No not presently.

Kira Pospel: Because based on the hotline calls and everything the people in those houses it would be nice to see _____ offer something positive from the community.

Emily Urban: That's a good idea.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: That's with who?

Emily Urban: OCFS.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: OCFS.

Kira Pospel: Office of Children and Family Services.

Emily Urban: Yeah, absolutely reaching them because specifically cooling, we do target households with vulnerable household members and if the household has a child under age 6 that would qualify the household for cooling. That was a change we made for the upcoming cooling season. If someone is vulnerable based on their age. So, under age 6 or age 60 or older they will automatically meet the medical requirement to receive an air conditioner or a fan. Most of the time they would have to provide proof of an actual medical condition, but now the age would satisfy that medical condition. All they would need to do is just prove their age for that.

Kira Pospel: OCFS is in charge of the program _____(cutting off).

Emily Urban: Can you say that again?

Kira Pospesel: OCFS is responsible for the adult service program that we had, and they run all the DPS _____.

Emily Urban: Yeah so, we could hit them as well.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Are you reaching out at all to the Office for Aging?

Emily Urban: Yes, we always work in partnership for Office of the Aging. There are quite a few agencies on our interagency taskforce it's DPS, NYSEDA, HCR, Office of the Aging, I think a few others. So yeah, we always work on the co-promotion of all our benefits. Any time we have any kind of messaging for HEAP, Office of the Aging is very quick to get the word out for us to get those out to the local offices.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Good. Any other questions, comments on coordination? Okay um the next thing on the agenda is the State Plan Needs Assessment.

Emily Urban: Okay, so the State Plan the 2021/2022 State Plan was written into revisions that we made in the 2021 State Plan. So, if you look on our website there is no State Plan for 2021/2022. All of the revisions were built into that state plan, and it was intended to cover both program years. And that was allowed for HHS, and we did take advantage of that. But, this year, we will be putting out a new State Plan that is the plan for 22/23. Later this spring, we are going to be announcing our Needs Assessment comment period. That's when we gather all of the comments on what's going good in the program, what's not so good. What the unmet needs are and what the wants are. And that is so we can gear up to create our draft State Plan. So, the BGAC will be noticed when the Needs Assessment comment period begins. That usually happens around April.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Great. Are there any questions, comments about the Needs Assessment? Andy and Kira, any comments, suggestions?

Andy Stone: Nope, I'm good.

Kira Pospesel: _____ (cutting out) too.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Alrighty. The next item on the agenda is the meeting schedule for the year. We actually have three more meetings scheduled: May 5th, August 4th and November 3rd. Are we...?

Vivvy Williams: Well, the dates are subject to change but at this time, these are the dates and will continue to be on Thursdays. So, it's a Thursday that first Thursday of the month quarterly.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Okay and are we anticipating doing them in person?

Vivvy Williams: That's the part that's subject to change. If we have, we will have it over the phone, webinar, we are looking into that to see if we may be able to do it as a webinar if we're not able to make it. But right now, it's being scheduled for us to be in the media center.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: One thing I would like to request, if we're going to be meeting here in the media center is that we make sure that we can accommodate more than two people on the phone lines, I think that's really critical because as we see today, this is a challenging day to get to Albany and so we have some people on the phone but we might have had more people on the phone should they have had the option. So, if there's anything that can be done to increase

the number of phone lines that are available, that would be a wonderful thing. So, are there any other comments? Questions for Emily or anyone else?

Ken Gossel: I know ERAP got underway in December with a bunch of payments, Emergency Rental Assistance, could you just share some of that information if you know it?'

Emily Urban: Sure, I don't have any statistics with me, but I know that all of the PSE regulated utilities have signed the vendor agreement so that's all going well. We are meeting with our vendor Guide House several times a week to work out any questions or anything pending with them. So, the payments are beginning. We had a meeting with them earlier today about that, so they do have some payments files ready to go out. They were just waiting on that. And I believe those are to the different PSE vendors.

Ken Gossel: And the applications are now again open for ERAP do I understand?

Emily Urban: No, not for ERAP utilities.

Ken Gossel: I thought I say maybe in the paper, I didn't read the article a court case that was opening them back up...

Emily Urban: oh okay

Ken Gossel: but maybe I'm mistaken.

Emily Urban: I haven't heard that officially, but I can certainly find that out as soon as possible and let you know.

Kira Pospesel: He may be thinking of the case for the actual rental cases. Certain counties have different dollars_____ (cutting off).

Ken Gossel: For the rental perhaps.

Emily Urban: Yeah, it might be for the rental only side.

Ken Gossel: Thank you.

Emily Urban: But we can always get them with RAS right now that is still open.

Ken Gossel: Great, thank you.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Great, so unless there are other comments or questions, I think we are at a point of adjourning and there are only two of us. Do you want to make a motion and I'll second?

Ken Gossel: I'll move.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: I'll second and I guess we agree.

Ken Gossel: Yes, we do.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: And you folks on the phone do you agree that we should adjourn?

Andy Stone: Agreed.

Kira Pospesel: Agreed thank you.

Sue Montgomery-Corey: Thank you so much and thank you for hanging in there with us on the phone. Alright and I think that's it.