

HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday, May 2, 2024

A meeting of the Block Grant Advisory Council was held via WebEx on Thursday, February 1, 2024. The meeting began at 1:00 pm.

Attendees

Andy Stone, Executive Director, NYS Weatherization Directors Association

Emily Urban, NYS OTDA HEAP

Kenneth Gossel, National Fuel Gas

Paul Brady, Executive Director, New York Public Welfare Association

Kira Pospesel, Commissioner, Greene County Social Services

Shiran Ybanez, New York City HEAP

Beth Natale, Acting BGAC secretary

Discussion

Beth Natale: Good afternoon, everyone, welcome to the May 2nd, 2024, Block Grant Meeting. I'm Beth Natale filling in for Vivvy as the secretary today. Can we just have everybody go around and introduce themselves please?

Andy Stone: Sure, I'm Andy Stone, can you hear me. I'm with the New York State Weatherization Directors Association.

Paul Brady: Paul Brady, I'm the Executive Director at New York Public Welfare.

Kira Pospesel: And I'm Kira Pospesel, I'm the Commissioner of Social Services for Greene County.

Ken Gossel: And Ken Gossel, National Fuel.

Emily Urban: And Emily Urban, New York State Officer of Temporary and Disability Assistance Home Energy Assistance Program. Beth are we all set? Are you ready to pass it over to Ken?

Beth Natale: Yeah, we're all set, we can go ahead and start with the agenda.

Ken Gossel: Terrific, well, thank you all for joining today. I really appreciate it. I will ask if everybody has had an opportunity to review the meeting minutes from last meeting, and whether there's any revisions that we see.

Kira Pospesel: And I've read them, and I don't have any revisions, so I will offer you a motion to approve them.

Ken Gossel: Thank you, a second?

Andy Stone: Second, Ken.

Ken Gossel: Thank you, Andy. All in favor?

All: Aye.

Ken Gossel: Any opposed? Meeting minutes are approved. So, I will turn it over to OTDA for the Federal Funding update, thank you.

Emily Urban: Thank you, Ken. Alright, good afternoon, everybody, thanks for coming on today. So, for the funding update, we actually do have an update from the last meeting. HHS just released the remainder of the FY2024 Nationwide LIPEAP funding. So, the total released, and this is the final number as far as we know, the total release is \$4.1 billion nationwide. We are funded under the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2024, and other Extensions Act signed on September 30th. As of about a week or two ago, 9% of our remaining funding was released, so initially only 90% of our funding was released, and we did have 9% of that remaining 10% released to us, and that 1% is still being withheld as usual in the event of other federal needs. New York State was awarded a little less than 10% of the total funds bringing our final funding for this year to about \$396 million. So, with this last release, we got about \$35 billion total and that would be allocated as we normally do our funding. So, 10% to Admin so the districts will see their administrative allocation ceiling raised up to 99%. And 15% of that will go to weatherization, so 5% to NYSERDA, 10% to HCR for weatherization services, and then the remaining funds will go to program spending. So, that's looking like our final spending for this year. Are there any questions on that before I get into how we're using those funds?

Alright, so our operations for this year, we had a regular benefit component that ran from November 1st to April 12th, 2024, so just closed a couple of weeks ago. We did extend that beyond the original closing date, which was March 15th, so we were able to extend that out a little bit to April 12th. We have about 1.55 million benefits and \$200 million in expenditures, so that is about the same number of benefits since last year, but the expenditures are down considerably from last year because our benefit amounts were much higher last year due to that additional federal funding that we had. So, last year, we had 1 million benefits and \$319 million expended, and as of right now we have 1.55 million regular benefits and \$211 million expended. So, that could go up as the districts wrap up the rest of their remaining applications, so it could end up being a little bit higher than that, but it's still quite a bit lower than last year just because of the absence of that additional funding that we had.

Our emergency benefit component opened up on January 2nd, 2024, and those were also scheduled to close on March 15th, and we extended that out to August 30th of 2024, or until funding is expended. So, on March 14th, we started our second emergency benefit, so first emergency benefit started in January, second emergency was in March a little bit later this year than last year, but we will be offering both emergency benefits through the entirety of the summer as long as that funding does not run out. So, this is possible because the emergency benefit obligations are down by about 20% this year over last year's emergencies, and the biggest reason for that is because we had such a mild winter, there were just fewer emergencies out there. There were also some utilities that were issuing shut offs this winter, so that decreased the emergencies in New York City, especially considerably. So, our emergency benefits expenditures are 93,500 and about \$56 million have been expended so far, as opposed to last year when we had 110,000 benefits and about \$70 million expended. So, we do have some funding left in that, so that's why we're keeping it open. By keeping emergency open through the summer, we're allowing households to have summer fill-ups if they are out of fuel, and it's not technically an emergency because they're not using their heat, but if they are out of heat and they don't have the means to get another fill-up, they can apply for that emergency benefit and have the fuel either to get fuel ready for when the winter comes. And for utilities, if somebody had a utilities shut-off notice and that does include domestic electric, those households can also apply for up to two emergency benefits, and particularly in the case of domestic electric benefits, households will be able to use that to operate their cooling equipment through the summer. So, that was intentional to only leave emergency open, and that was especially to support summer electric use.

Our Heating Equipment Repair Replacement that opened up on October 2nd, and that's scheduled to close September 30th, same as Clean and Tune, so both of those benefits are scheduled to operate year-round as they have been the last couple of years. Our obligations and expenditures are up pretty considerably for both of these benefits. We have about 2,400 Heating Equipment Repair Replacements and about \$7.5 million expended, compared to last year where we had 2,000 and only \$6 million expended. With pending obligations, we're actually very close to spending that full \$10 million. So, if we run out of that \$10 million that is obligated to Heating Equipment Repair Replacement, we may not be able to run that year-round, or we'll have to make a change to our spending plan to put more funding into Repair Replacement to be able to continue that. We would hate to shut it down in September when people are just starting to turn their furnaces on again, getting ready for the winter, so, we really like keeping that benefit open year-round so there isn't that huge rush in the winter months. So, we're keeping a close eye on that to see how the funding will shake out there, but really successful this year with repairs and replacement. The funding is going, that's what we like to see. And same with Clean and Tune. We are about 4,300 Clean and Tune benefits, and \$1.4 million spent, as opposed to 3,800 and \$1.2 million last year. So, this also does not include pending obligations, so we are also really close to the \$2 million allocated to Clean and Tune. So, same as Heating Equipment Repair Replacement. We're keeping a really close eye on it to see if we're going to approach that limit that we have allocated to that component and making any program changes as necessary, whether that's shutting it down or putting more money into it to keep it running year-round. And that's just due to the higher cost of the jobs this year. We did increase those maximum benefit amounts this year, and that's just due to the higher costs that the vendors are experiencing, so we will adjust accordingly.

And then Cooling just opened up on April 15th, and that is scheduled to close August 30th, 2024, or until that funding is expended whichever comes first. Last year, we were not able to run through the whole summer, and we did have to shut down early because we did run out of funding. So, not a whole lot to report on cooling yet, because the benefit just opened, but I will tell you we have about 4,000 cooling applications pending statewide and about 2,700 of them are in New York City, so really good uptake so far in the first couple of weeks of the program. We did open two weeks earlier this year, and that was intentional to get the households in sooner to apply for the benefit to get the air conditioners installed before the really hot weather hits. So, Kira you were saying at the beginning of the call it's beautiful out today finally, we had our heat on last week. So, it's nice, it's getting warm and hopefully households are taking advantage of the cooling program and vendors are able to get those ACs installed as soon as possible. Our maximum benefit for Cooling this year is \$800 for window units, and up to \$1000 for the sleeve units if the household has an existing sleeve, normally that happens in apartment buildings. We have been made aware of the new Energy Star requirements that will be beginning in 2025, I've been told, and that will affect the cost of Energy Star air conditioners. So, we will be taking all of that into account when we make our plan for next years' cooling program including our maximum benefit amounts and how much funding is allocated to Cooling. This year, we had originally allocated \$15 million to Cooling, same as last year. With this opening up two weeks earlier, that really wouldn't have got us through the whole summer if spending was similar to last year. So, NYERDA, they have accepted \$7 million less in weatherization funds this year, they are going to be replacing that \$7 million in HEAP funds with other federal funding, so they will still be able to serve the same amount of households with Empower Plus benefits and services, and that \$7 million will go into Cooling. So, we are funding Cooling this year at \$22 million which is great. We do anticipate that will get us through at least most of the summer. We had kind of predicted like mid to late August, so hopefully, we can squeak that out to the end of August so we can run to the full August 30th. If we do run out of the \$22 million prior to that, we will have to close the program down earlier, but not nearly as early as we had to last year with the \$15 million. And that's it for the benefits for this year. Are there any questions or any input on that?

Ken Gossel: No, great summary. Thank you also for keeping the HEAP emergency open, and I think the plan to keep it open or to announce any way through the end of August is very helpful. So, much appreciated.

Emily Urban: Yeah, of course, we hope that's helpful to households. We weren't able to do the summer electric benefit this year; we did not have the funding to do that without the extra federal funding. It was kind of in talks to get an extra \$2 billion nationwide, and that was not approved. So, we are at the \$4.1 billion nationwide this year, so we did what we could. We are always advocating for additional funding. If that comes through, we would love to start a summer electric benefit, but as a bridge to keep assisting households, we hope the emergency is at least somewhat helpful. It was a really great program year. Obviously, it was really mild but still a lot of uptake on our benefits this year. As I said, not too many emergencies, but our regular benefits were right on track, still serving the same number of households. I think outreach was great. We were able to reach a lot of households this year and that's done great things through the districts and all of the work they've done. We finished up our HEAP monitoring last week. We went out to about 10 districts, there's 10 districts and overwhelmingly, really good. The timeliness was great, we reviewed cases in all of those counties. We reviewed

their processes to make sure everything was going well, and nothing too remarkable to report out there. The districts are doing really well.

Ken Gossel: Great, thank you.

Emily Urban: Anything else, oh, yeah go ahead Ken.

Ken Gossel: Nope, that's great. I'm going to jump into the Needs Assessment that you guys have relatively recently gotten comments on, so that might be a good segway to let us know what's come in and then jump into the next year's State Plan.

Emily Urban: Sure, yep, so our Needs Assessment ran from March through the end of April, so just closed down about a week ago. We accepted comments by mail, by e-mail on the development of next years' plan. We had last year's actually made the current years' plan so the 23/24 plan posted, and we are accepting comments on what the current plan is and what changes the public would like in next year's plan. We did hold our public hearings earlier this year, so historically, we've held our hearings in the summer after the draft plan is already written, and already approved in its draft form, and historically it is more difficult to make changes in August than it is in April. We're still developing the plan now, so it was recommended that we hold our hearings earlier, and thus to get more meaningful participation in the state plan development. So, we did move those hearings up and those took place last week. There were four of them, and they were all over Webex. We let everybody know. This was on our website. This was on OTDA's website, it was also published in newspapers statewide. We sent letters to yourselves and the BGAC, interagency taskforce, legislative leaders, district commissioners. We tried to hit everybody, some other interest groups, to make sure everybody had their fair shot to get those comments in. We did get some good comments. Just kind of high-level overview, I won't go into all of the comments. But in the general sense, people wanted to see HEAP advertise more, absolutely in support of that. They want more public hearings. For summer, they want to see a summer electric benefit, and they would also like the medical documentation requirement removed from Cooling, and also a cash benefit to offset utility costs. In general, there was a request to increase benefit levels, and that was across all HEAP benefits. Increase the resource limit so we do have that resource limit for emergency and Heating Equipment Repair Replacement, they wanted to see that increased. We did increase that pretty considerably this year, and that was to keep in line with the temporary assistance resource limits, but they wanted to see them a bit higher. There were also requests to explore electric energy options, to work with NYSERDA more, DPS and the utilities. They want an added benefit here for apartments that have heat included in their rent, but they do require the use of a heat pump for the electricity to get head into those apartments, so there was a request to get a benefit specifically to those households. We are looking into what that means, what the scope is, what the cost is. They want to see expanded opportunities to install heat pumps. They also want to expand emergency for HEAP recipients that are not the customer of record. Currently our emergency benefit component does require the household to be the actual customer of record which is a little bit different than our regular benefit component where they only have to be responsible for their energy costs, so they could pay indirectly through as long as they are paying their vendor directly for heat, the bill would not necessarily have to be in their name but for emergency, it does. And that's kind of the gist of the comments we are receiving. We are going to be taking all of those comments into

consideration when we are developing our plan, which we are doing currently. We also met with all of the local district HEAP coordinators to get their feel on the program to see what changes they would like to see, and that was in general for the whole program, everything from the program, how we operate, how people apply, benefit amounts, benefit types, forms, training, all of that. So, we met with the districts a few weeks ago to get their input on that and all of these comments from theirs to hearings and the written comments that we received, we take all of those into consideration when we're developing our plan. So, we are going to be using, obviously, our funding isn't known for next year, so we will be planning next year's program on the assumption that we will receive level funding. So, this year again \$396 million so we usually plan or anticipate to get about the same amount of funding. So, our funding has kind of been all over the place in the last couple of years because we did have that additional emergency funding through CARES, through ARPA, and other additional funds that LIHEAP was funded under. So, this year, we're back to a kind of "normal" total funding available. So, it may be a little bit easier to plan next year's program with the assumption that we will have about the same amount as we did this year. Obviously, with the mild winter, it's not a complete 1 for 1. We won't be able to definitely state what will happen next year, but it will be a little bit easier to predict this year. So, we're looking at our benefit amounts, our benefit dates, and really trying to balance the winter benefit, so that would be our regular and emergency benefits, between the other needs of households throughout the whole year, so, electric benefits, cooling, and then other benefits that we provide Clean and Tune and HERR. So, we really have to find that balance to be able to serve the whole state in the best way that we can.

Andy Stone: How was the response rate for the Needs Assessment holding it earlier in the year rather than in the summer. Is it up, is it about the same?

Emily Urban: Honestly, we didn't get a whole lot of engagement in the public hearings, not as much as we were hoping for especially considering we did give a five week lead up time for that. So, it is new this year, I don't know if people were maybe just not anticipating them being earlier, even though we did get the word out as best as we could, so honestly, no, in engagement wasn't great, but we still did get written comments, as we normally would. Those are about the same as they would be. So, once the plan is drafted, we will be posting it to OTDA's website and accepting comments again on the draft plan, we just won't be holding additional hearings. So, all comments will still be considered as they always would, no matter what time of year they would be received. There just won't be the actual hearings in the summer.

Andy Stone: Okay, thanks.

Emily Urban: So, hopefully next year, if people are more familiar with the process, they'll realize that the hearings are sooner, and then we'll get more engagement next year. There was a change to the model LIHEAP plan template this year. As of the last meeting, it was just kind of proposed changes, we didn't know what they were. Now, we do have the draft template, and nothing huge changed, a little bit with the layout to make it accessible. Some of the language changed just to clarify what is being asked, and then there were a couple new questions added. Nothing actually earth shattering, a little bit less than we were actually expecting. So, just some of the changes of note are, we are being asked to document whether the state has an online application process, and for which benefit component. They would like to know how documentation is submitted by applicants to support their applications, and with the

advancement of IES, the Integrated Eligibility System that OTDA has been working on for the last couple of years, we are pretty good with that. I feel we are ahead of some other states with how people are able to submit documentation right now. We have our application, New York Doc Submit where they can just use their phone to scan their documentation, sends it right to the district. New York City has a way to submit an online electronic information documentation, and if the household applies through My Benefits, they can also submit documentation when they apply online. And then, of course, they can still mail, they can fax, drop it off to the districts. So, a lot of ways that we are able to accept that documentation. In the State we are also going to be improving our application process with IES. It is kind of a slow process, but we're really trying to build the best system that we can to best serve the whole state, not just for HEAP but for all program components to make that application more streamlined. So, good things to report there, and hopefully more to come and future plans to expand online applications and documentation submittal.

We are being asked to document if and how HEAP dollars are used for natural disasters. There are clarifying questions for renter's benefits, defining what a renter is and what kind of benefits they get. Whether weatherization is covering solar, that is a new question. More questions on outreach through electronic means. So, they're asking if we use e-mail, texting, events, social media, so really getting into more modern ways of how states are providing outreach to get the word out about their benefits. Information on subgrantees, so this varies a lot by state, some states do it all at the state level, as you know in New York State, we use the local districts, so they would like clarification on that, who exactly your subgrantee network is. Copies of our vendor agreements, and then providing some definitions for obligations, expenditures, expenditure timeframes, and administrative costs. And that's all I have, so we're really deep into the State Plan, and we will be posting that as soon as it is drafted and approved, and we will be taking comments this summer. Any comments on the Plan and Needs Assessment?

Andy Stone: Are you going to use the same process when the actual draft plan comes out for who it's going to be disseminated to?

Emily Urban: Yep, so, we will use the same distribution that we would for Needs Assessment.

Andy Stone: Okay, thanks.

Emily Urban: I'm not sure if we would do the newspaper announcements, we might, I don't know if that's been decided. I know we do the newspaper announcements specific to the hearings, so, I'm not sure if that will occur for the summer comments, but we will have to decide that. But certainly, the letters out to our distribution network. Anything else?

Ken Gossel: Nothing here. I would ask is there any new business to discuss?

Emily Urban: Nothing from me, if the other members would like to share any new business.

Ken Gossel: Apparently none. Let me quickly ask, we have a remaining two meetings of the year listed as August 1st and then December 5th. On the December 5th, we're normally every three months, that's about four was that on availability or maybe the first week of November

which is usually pretty busy HEAP time, is there a reason it's December, I guess rather than November?

Emily Urban: That's a good question, I actually didn't realize that was four months and not three. Um, unfortunately, Vivvy is not here today, she's on vacation, so I will have her look into that when she gets back and include that in the next meeting or before that if necessary.

Ken Gossel: That would be great.

Emily Urban: Yeah, thanks for bringing it up to my attention.

Ken Gossel: Oh, sure, and it might be a little bit more relevant right around, hopefully HEAP will be open and going strong by November, I don't know whether its 4th or whatever the first Thursday is, but that would be great Emily, thank you for checking.

Emily Urban: Yeah, of course.

Ken Gossel: Well, if there's nothing else, then I'll accept a motion to adjourn.

Andy Stone: So moved.

Ken Gossel: And a second, thank you very much. All in favor?

All: Aye.

Ken Gossel: Enjoy the rest of spring and the start to summer. Very great to see you again. Thank you for all your hard work, take care.

Meeting end 1:33pm.