

HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday, November 7, 2024

A meeting of the Block Grant Advisory Council was held via WebEx on Thursday, November 7, 2024. The meeting began at 1:00 pm.

Attendees

Kira Pospesel, Commissioner, Greene County Social Services

Paul Brady, Executive Director, New York Public Welfare Association

Keri Stark, Director, NYS OTDA HEAP

Ken Gossel, National Fuel Gas

Dianna Yang, Council, NYS OTDA

Leila Eliot, NYS OTDA

Shiran Ybañez, New York City HEAP

Vivvy Williams, BGAC Secretary

Discussion

Ken Gossel: Good afternoon. This is the Ken Gossel and today is Thursday, November 7th, 2024; and this is the quarterly meeting of the Home Energy Assistance Block Grant Advisory Council meeting. I'm going to start by taking attendance for those on this WebEx, please.

Vivvy Williams: I can start. My name is Vivvy Williams, and I'm the secretary for the BGAC Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting.

Kira Pospesel: Good afternoon, folks. You can see Paul and I are here together. We are actually at a meeting at the Mariott in Albany. So, this is Kira Pospesel, I'm the commissioner of DSS in Greene County.

Paul Brady: I am Paul Brady, I'm the Executive Director of New York Public Welfare Association.

Shiran Ybañez: Shiran Ybañez here, New York City HEAP.

Keri Stark: Keri Stark is here, New York State HEAP Bureau, and I think Dianna is on. Hi, Dianna.

Dianna: Hi everybody, sorry on the audio, I was trying to get my audio to work. My name is Dianna Yang, I'm the Council here at OTDA. HEAP is in my portfolio.

Ken Gossel: Great, welcome all.

Vivvy Williams: We have one more person.

Dianna: Yep, Layla is here.

Leila: Hi, I'm sorry, I'm Leila and I work for Dianna and yes, thank you for inviting me. I'm excited just to talk with you all and learn more about this.

Ken Gossel: Welcome, Leila, I love that excitement. As a first order of business, everyone should have received the meeting minutes for our last session, August 1st. I'm just wondering if anybody has any corrections or modifications to those minutes? I do have two minor ones, but anybody else first? Okay, there being none, I did have on page 7 just two typos in the very long paragraph where I was speaking. In the second line it reads, "The paying you mentioned." P A Y I N G, that should be ping, P I N G I N G, and that was referencing the automated system that OTDA is developing for utility, Public Assistance Matching purposes for utility EAP programs. So, that should read, ping. And a few lines down just it reads "Renter including benefits" and that was actually Renter included benefits, certain type of benefit for the recipients of HEAP, sometimes they're renter included. So, those are the only 2 changes. Would anybody else, well, I would entertain a motion to approve the minutes.

Kira Pospesel: Yes, I'll offer you that motion to approve those minutes with those two changes.

Ken Gossel: Thank you, Commissioner. Second please?

Leila: I second that.

Ken Gossel: Thank you. All in favor? Aye.

All: Aye.

Ken Gossel: Any opposed? The minutes are passed. Thank you very much for that. I'm going to turn it over to Keri Stark for discussion on the agenda on our updates to the 2024/2025 program.

Keri Stark: Thank you, Ken. I just want to give a brief update of 23/24. I know we spoke last meeting about this, but I did want to just let you know, just kind of reiterate, and then we also finished Cooling between that last time we met and this time that we're meeting. So, we did issue 1.6 million Regular benefits, 146,000 Emergency benefits, over 3,000 HERR benefits,

6,500 Clean and Tune benefits, and over 25,000 Cooling benefits. So, that was a great program year for us, and we found that to be a successful year. I'm looking forward to the 24/25 program. We just opened regular last week, November 1st, and HERR and Clean and Tune have opened for 24/25 on October 1st. On October 31st, OTDA was notified that HHS released the first set of funding which includes \$3.7 billion in LIHEAP funds of which \$360 million was allocated to New York State. OTDA is currently working on calculating administrative and program allocations and will advise districts of that via a local commissioner's memorandum, as soon as those are formulated. We planned the 24/25 year under the assumption of flat funding of \$395 million, so we do expect that we'll get more later on down the road. Planning the program last year was about the same amount of funding. So, planning the program for 23/24 was the same amount of funding the previous year so was helpful for us in predicting where the funds will be spent, so that's why we sort of we continued that methodology this year. We also did some research; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA has forecasted another mild winter for New York State. We do that so we want to make sure that we have enough money set aside for regular and emergency and find a balance between providing those benefits as well as those for cooling and other energy benefits throughout the year. So, the dates of operation for our 24/25 program again, regular opened on November 1st, we plan to close that down on March 17th. Our first and second emergency programs will open on January 2nd, 2025, and again close down on March 17th. Like I mentioned a few minutes ago, HERR and Clean and Tune opened on October 1st, we plan to run those again year-round and close on September 30th of 25, and Cooling we are planning to open on April 15th of 25, and close that down on August 29th of 25. I know we say this every single time, but all these closing dates may be shortened or extended depending on demand and availability of funding. Please note, we are running our first and second emergency components concurrently again this year. So, this means that a household can receive their first emergency benefit, can apply for their second emergency benefit as soon as they are in need, and households and districts will not need to wait for another policy announcement and a release from OTDA before issuing a second emergency benefit to those households.

Our 24 and 25 HEAP deliverable and utility benefit amounts remain the same as last year. So, our base benefit amounts remain the same. Your oil, kerosene, and propane regular benefit is \$900. Wood pellets, coal and corn that's \$635, natural gas or electric heat is \$400. As well as our emergency components the oil, kerosene and propane emergency benefit is \$900, wood pellets, coal and corn is \$635, the heat related domestic remains at \$185, the combined natural gas heat with a heat related domestic remained at \$585, electric heat only emergency remained at \$585, and natural gas heat only remained at \$400.

We did increase our Tier 1 household add-on. The add-on for our lowest income households; that was increased to \$61. Our vulnerable member add-on stayed the same at \$35. So, potentially, if a household meets both of those criteria, the tier 1 and the vulnerable member, they could receive an add-on of a total of \$96 combined on top of their base benefit.

For 24/25 HEAP heat included benefits remain the same. Tier 1 benefit is \$50, the tier 2 benefit is \$45, and the heat and eat for our subsidized housing with heat included in the rent or a drug and alcohol treatment facility, etc. is \$21. There were no changes to those. There were no

changes as well to our HERR, Clean and Tune or Cooling maximum benefit amounts; those remain the same for 24/25. So, our repair benefit amount, we can go up to \$4,000, for replacement for a furnace we can go up to \$8,000, and for Clean and Tune, we can go the actual cost up to \$500. For Cooling, nobody wants to talk about that right now, but for 24/25 for a window portable air conditioner or fan, again, it's actual cost up to \$800. And for the wall sleeve unit that's up to \$1,000. So, those remain the same.

We allocated \$10 million to HERR, \$2 million to Clean and Tune for this upcoming program year, which is about the same that we did last year. The maximum resource limit for our HERR benefit remains the same, that's \$10,000 per household. We allocated \$15 million to Cooling which is the same as the initial amount that we allocated last year before we increased it with that \$7 million that NYSERDA didn't take from their allocation. So, we did exhaust all of that funding last year, so we spent over the \$22 million. We weren't able to allocate any more than the \$15 million, yet at this time, we will take a look at funding and how things are going throughout the year to see if anything can be done for Cooling. We always keep an eye on that, but at this time, we only have the \$15 million available for Cooling.

So, that's it about our 24/25 program. Just some additional updates coming up, I know I did speak a little bit about this at the last meeting. This is in regards to the OTDA utility data sharing bill that was passed. So, a new law was passed last year, Social Services Law 131SS that requires OTDA to provide for automated identification of OTDA assistance program participants for participation in Utility Corporation Energy Affordability Programs or EAPs. So, OTDA has had several meetings with the joint utilities to discuss the proposed data match system, and we're working towards a solution that will meet their needs and are on track to meet the implementation deadline of 12/22/24.

Another update for you is on our federal reports. We are preparing both of our households' served report and the performance measures report. For FFY 24 our final files to vendors for performance measures went out in October, and those are due back now to OTDA and that performance measures report is important because it does show the energy burden for households and it's based on their income size, their heating type, and we do a calculation and that helps us determine whether our HEAP benefit amounts are appropriately sized. Based on the data from our previous performance measures reports, and from NYSERDA data that predicts the cost of heat in the upcoming winter, our base heater benefits were appropriately sized this year to reduce the energy burden on households. However, for households with the lowest income, so those are our lowest 25% of households based on income, our benefits were not adequately reducing their energy burden, and that's why we increased the add-on for their regular heater benefits for the program year, and we'd like to continue to try and look at that going farther in the future as well.

So, training, HEAP held all our regional trainings, we did those over the summer. Those were concluded in August. We just concluded rounds of eligibility of certification trainings which those are geared towards new HEAP workers. We train them on all of the things that you need to know to process HEAP cases. We did that throughout the month of October. And I just wanted to let everybody know, we do have several online trainings and courses that district staff or

alternate certifiers can take. Those are on TrainingSpace. Those are self-paced courses, and they can be taken at staff's leisure. So, those are available for staff if needed.

One more thing, I do want to just let everybody know we are still working towards finding an additional member or additional members for the BGAC. Our next BGAC meeting will be on February 6th, 2025. We are also looking to go back to 1 in-person meeting per year and I think we decided last time that spring would be the best time to do an in-person meeting due to weather and things like that. So, we will look at doing that for May or June. March, April, May, yeah, May for the May meeting. But that includes OTDA's agenda items. I would like to hand it back to you Ken.

Ken Gossel: Thanks, Keri. Greatly appreciate it. You are very, very organized, I can tell, cause you sort of hit all of the things that I was maybe thinking of asking.

Keri Stark: Oh, good.

Ken Gossel: So, thank you for that. I'm going to first ask or first commend you, I know you're working hard, and involving utilities on a utility data sharing, so thank you. I know we've had a bunch of discussions and there is some helpful information that will be shared to help assist the utilities not only in enrolling in the low-income programs that they run, but also to best tier these customers for the most advantageous discount. So, that is greatly appreciated. With respect to the dollar amount that you had talked about for the tier 1 increasing to \$61 that's very helpful. I wanted to mention that in future years when we are looking at some of the benefit changes, whether it's to those add-on amounts or whether it's to renter included benefit amounts for the Heat and Eat amount, what largely the utilities are doing is using HEAP dollar amount received from them in a benefit for purposes of tiering. So, I believe you are very well aware of that and I'm assuming are very cautious when you're establishing new dollar amounts such that when payment amounts are sent to the utilities, they can have confidence that a particular type of add-on or tier 1 tier 2 that they're able to differentiate those amounts, if you will by source or can assume that the benefit is comprised of certain of those elements. And that's how we're allowed to best tier these customers into the most advantageous discount. So, all I'm simply asking is if you change those, it would be helpful in draft format to run it by maybe the joint utilities and Department of Public Service staff and/or to just make sure that things would then be able to flow easily with the utilities.

Keri Stark: Okay, thank you.

Ken Gossel: Sure, I'm going to open up and ask if others have questions of Keri with respect to the presentation.

Kira Pospesel: So, Keri, so as the counties have been authorizing benefits, apparently some of the smaller dealers have been asking when can they anticipate getting paid. So, when do you think those first checks are going to be going out?

Keri Stark: That is a great question. I just had an e-mail, let's see. Let me find them. Okay, so for our HEAP vouchers, we create those vendor direct payments in October. They stay in issued status until they are transferred to OSC for payment once we receive our federal funding. We just got the federal funding on 10/31, so, on this coming Sunday, 11/10, we will begin sending those vouchers to OSC for payment to HEAP vendors. So, that will start this Sunday. So, we start with we have to do it in like batches. So, the first batch will be all HEAP payments not equal to 496, those will get sent to SFS this Sunday. Next Sunday, the rest of the 24/25 HEAP vouchers will be sent to SFS and then to OCS for payment, and then after that, after 11/17, the vouchers will go to SFS every Sunday per your districts for their 13-day HEAP voucher review period. So, we have to do them in 2 batches to split it up. And we'll start that this Sunday, we'll do one batch, next Sunday we'll do the next batch, and then they will recur every Sunday after that.

Kira Pospesel: Do you have any idea when they actually release those checks, though?

Keri Stark: You mean when OSC cuts the check after they get released? I didn't think it was that long of a period of time after it gets transferred to OSC, but I can check on that and see how long that process takes, because I don't know right off the top of my head. I didn't think it was that long of a timeframe, but I'll check.

Paul Brady: Keri, we had a commissioners' meeting today and the topic came up because at least one of the commissioners had indicated that they had been contacted by one of their vendors and was having a difficult time and wanted to know when that money might start to flow. And I assume this is a small vendor that operates on a fairly small margin, so having that information that we can share with the commissioners would be really helpful.

Keri Stark: Yeah, so again, we haven't been able to cut any checks yet, so nothing has gone out. That's something, were they talking about last year that took them a while to get payment?

Paul Brady: No.

Keri Stark: Oh, because...

Kira Pospesel: Because last year, maybe I'm confused, but I thought last year was like Christmas week before we seen any money.

Keri Stark: Oh, yeah, between the time, it depends, we may have gotten our funding late last year as well, and that could affect things. But we just got the funding in, so I mean, this Sunday we're starting to release payments, so it should be coming quicker than Christmas, I hope.

Paul Brady: Yeah, if you could just let us know, that would be really helpful. Because if you can let Kira or myself know, then we can get the information out to those commissioners.

Keri Stark: Okay, yeah, I'll make a note of that, and I'll let you know. So, you want to know how long does it take the payment to go out from the point of time where...

Paul Brady: You said the first batch of vouchers goes over on Sunday, it would be kind of helpful to know what the duration of time is once that event occurs to cutting the checks.

Keri Stark: Okay.

Kira Pospesel: Actually, who's in the batch, because it might have been the county, they actually might be in the second batch.

Keri Stark: Yeah, okay, let me see if I can find that out. I will get back to you.

Ken Gossel: Any other questions on any of that? Any other questions? I'm just going to ask Keri, OTDA is very helpful in participating with the Department of Public Service and utilities and other stakeholders on the EAP working group, and we're going to be discussing further potential improvements to the EAP program, and I just would ask for your involvement throughout that process. Hopefully, there's some changes that the state can make to the program to both provide potentially more benefits to customers, and potentially also alleviate some of the cost of burdens on utility rate payers, and potentially one of the things that may be helpful, perhaps it's something we asked for quite some time ago whether it would be possible to receive household income levels for HEAP related households and if so, what utilities might be able to do is put in place a percent of income based rate for those particular customers to provide them with an affordable bill, and then some of the other customers who might currently be receiving a larger discount but don't need it for an affordable bill, would still have this affordable bill but it would potentially free up resources and apply them where most needed. So, that I'm sure will be a very long process, but I just would ask for any assistance that you might be able to provide in that regard.

Keri Stark: So, I'm sorry, what was the first, you're asking for information from us or?

Ken Gossel: Eventually, maybe to start researching first whether it might be, you have the ability to share with customer consent or however household income with the utility...

Keri Stark: Oh, I see.

Ken Gossel: This is solely for purposes of providing energy assistance program discounts to these customers' bills.

Keri Stark: Okay, yep.

Ken Gossel: So, that would be the ask down the road what that would allow utilities to do is to develop new programs that would provide, I guess, optimal discount or heating assistance to these customers of ours.

Keri Stark: Okay, thank you for explaining that.

Ken Gossel: Any other new business? Hearing none, I will note that the agenda has the four meetings dates for next year: all Thursdays. February 6th, May 1st, August 7th, and November 6th. Thank you, Keri. The next one will be via WebEx saving me anyway, a trip from Buffalo in the snow to Albany, lovely Albany, but look I forward to meeting hopefully with you guys in person on May 1st. If there's nothing else, I'd accept a motion to adjourn.

Vivvy Williams: Motion to adjourn.

Ken Gossel: I will second it. All in favor?

All: Aye.

Ken Gossel: Any opposed? There being none, have a lovely winter season and look forward to being on a call again with you very shortly in February. Happy Holidays and be safe.