

# HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday, February 6, 2025

A meeting of the Block Grant Advisory Council was held via Webex on February 6, 2025. The meeting began at 1:00 PM.

## Attendees

Keri Stark, Director, NYS OTDA HEAP

Diana Yang, Council, NYS OTDA

Leila Eliot, NYS OTDA

Vivvy Williams, Secretary, NYS OTDA HEAP

Kira Pospesel, Commissioner, Greene County DSS

Shiran Ybañez, Deputy Director, New York City HRA

Ken Gossel, National Fuel Gas

Paul Brady, Executive Director, New York Public Welfare Association

## Discussion

Ken Gossel: Hi, good afternoon. This is Ken Gossel, and it's Thursday, February 6th, 2025. This is the quarterly Home Energy Assistance Program Block Grant Advisory Council meeting. I'm going to start by asking everyone who's participating in the Webex to please identify themselves.

Shiran Ybañez: Shiran Ybañez, New York City HRA.

Keri Stark: This is Keri Stark, New York State OTDA HEAP Bureau.

Paul Brady: Hi, it's Paul Brady, Executive Director of New York Public Welfare, and I just got off the phone with Kira. She's trying to get in. She's having some trouble, so she should join us very shortly.

Keri Stark: Oh, okay. Well, thank you so much for reaching out to her. Thank you.

Leila Eliot: Hi, Leila with OTDA Division of Legal Affairs, Leila Eliot.

Diana Yang: Hi, Diana Yang, also Division of Legal Affairs.

Vivvy Williams: Vivvy Williams, secretary for the BGAC. And Kira.

Kira Pospesel: Oh yes, I just popped in. Pardon my lateness. Sorry.

Vivvy Williams: We're just announcing who we are.

Kira Pospesel: Great.

Ken Gossel: Thank you. I believe that's everybody. Thanks for joining today. Attached to the agenda was the meeting minutes from our last meeting on November 7th, 2024. I was going to ask whether there were any changes that need to be made to the minutes, and if none, to accept the motion to accept them.

Kira Pospesel: So, I will make that motion for you.

Ken Gossel: Okay, and I can second. All in favor?

Paul Brady: Aye.

Vivvy Williams: Aye.

Ken Gossel: Minutes passed. Thank you very much. I'm going to turn over the discussion topics, starting updates to the 2024-2025 program to Keri, please. Thank you.

Keri Stark: Thank you so much. So yes, I am going to start with some updates on the 24-25 program. So to date, we have received 355 million in federal LIHEAP funds, plus 5 million in infrastructure funding. The 355 million represents 90% of our federal grant award, and we assume, as has been the case in prior years, that the remaining 10% will be released, and when that's released, that would be an additional 40 million dollars.

Our goal is to run our regular first and second emergencies through, if we can, early April, but we will be closely tracking and analyzing available funding and will alert districts as soon as practicable when we make any decisions regarding closing dates. I know we had a three-day brief closing period for the regular component from January 22nd through January 24th, and that was due to an overall shortfall in federal funding as well as an increase in applications.

Paul Brady: Keri, can we talk about that?

Keri Stark: Oh, yeah, sure.

Paul Brady: Because the notice came out, and it was same day.

Keri Stark: Yes, yes.

Paul Brady: And then, of course, it reopens within three or four days. It caught the districts off guard, and I guess the question is, you must have known. You

track the obligations that districts are entering into the system. What happened?

Keri Stark:

Well, yeah, we do track obligations, obviously, but districts do report pending numbers to us on a weekly basis, so they do report their pending numbers to us a week after they close. So they report pending to us by COB on a Tuesday for everything that closed that prior week on Friday, so we do get that. There is a little delay there with that. And we also try to keep our regular component open as long as possible so that we can serve as many people as we can. Sometimes it can be short notice that we have to close down, and I understand that that's difficult for districts, and I do apologize. It's not easy. I know it's not easy. We want to provide you more notice, and that is something that we will definitely work towards doing better in the future if we can.

I do want to just say, sometimes it is ... like I said, we want to provide the most benefits as we can with the funding we have, and in order to do that, we do have to sometimes track that by the week. But we did receive additional money, so that gave us the ability to ... you know, we reallocated money, so we were able to reallocate an additional 35 million to the regular benefit, which allowed us to reopen. So, any applicant that didn't receive a regular HEAP benefit during that three-day time period in which we closed and reopened ... We were able to ask districts to then re-evaluate anybody who applied, so households that were denied because the regular was closed are being re-evaluated for a regular benefit, so those individuals, those households could probably get a regular.

Kira Pospesel:

Keri, can I jump in? I believe your intention wasn't to cause confusion, but I think what Paul is saying ... OTDA has to appreciate the work and the chaos it caused at the local level. The way it happened, we got this on the 21st. Close of business day, it was effective, so we got that communication. On the 24th, we got another communication to say it's going to reopen on Saturday. Our offices aren't open on Saturday. It didn't clear up what was supposed to happen with those denials. We didn't get that communication until the 28th.

So, the frontline staff really had no idea what they were supposed to do with those denials for those three days. I had an older gentleman in the lobby ... He kept blaming "him." We didn't know who "him" was, and he finally blurted it out. He said, "President Trump, he did this to me," and I was like, "Oh my, we're all losing it now."

And then, between the newspaper reporters ... Here in Greene, I had every newspaper, magazine calling me for comments. I must've spent three hours in this one afternoon just giving comments to newspaper reporters, three hours I'll never get back in my life again, for chaos. So I really felt like the carpet was just ripped out from underneath us here, and we kept telling people that the program was going to be open to the end of March.

Keri Stark: Yeah, and I get that. No, that was extremely chaotic at both the district and the state level. I do understand, and I apologize. We're up about 52,000 benefits this time than we were last year, which is about \$10 million in spending, and that was a contribution to the temporary closure of the regular. That's something that did contribute to that. We can't always predict human behavior or the weather, so some of that was also a contributing factor, and we did serve additional SNAP households on our autopay as well.

So, there were some things that happened that were extremely beneficial, but also kind of contributed to us trying to figure out funding levels and how we're going to accommodate for some of these things that occurred. Yes, we were able to serve more people. We reached more people, we served more SNAP households. And we appreciate the fact that it is very stressful and very chaotic at the district level, and I apologize for that. That is not our goal. That is never something we want to do. We want to support you, we want to help you out, and want to provide guidance, good guidance to you, but I do understand that that was not something that we would ... That's not the model we want to follow, if that's any consolation.

Kira Pospesel: What shocked me is it was the coldest week of the year, the absolute coldest weather that we had, and bang, this all of a sudden happened. People thought it was a joke, and then we weren't getting communication. Basically, we got these just messages, and then I found out late in the afternoon at 4:47 ... I can remember the supervisor telling me they finally got a phone call. I was kind of shocked to see ... How do we run a program this way and nobody knows what's going on, and we can't give communication? And the clients were so upset.

Keri Stark: Yeah, I get that. Yeah.

Kira Pospesel: And no communication came to the Block Grant either. I mean, did anybody in the Block Grant get any of these messages or anything? I'm assuming no.

Ken Gossel: We just received it the same day as you did. When the notice was sent to the districts, we were given a copy. At least, I received a copy, and National Fuel, and, I think, all the other utilities.

Kira Pospesel: Yeah, I just ... Well ...

Paul Brady: Can we talk about the 35 million?

Keri Stark: Sure.

Paul Brady: Is that from the 355, or is it from the 40, the 10% holdback, or is it different money entirely?

Keri Stark: We're still working through where the 35 million is going to be allocated from. I know it was the governor that actually stepped in and said that the

state would be giving us 35 million. So if we end up reallocating that from other funding that we have that is less, eventually, how things work out in the end, we may be able to shift things around on our end to make up the 35 million, but that was something that the governor stepped in and provided.

Paul Brady: Okay. So it's not a circumstance where there's state money that's gone into this, that likely it's going to come out of the HEAP program in the current season from either clean and tune or equipment replacement, something like that?

Keri Stark: Yeah, that's still being worked out. I don't have that exact ... We won't know that part of it, if anything comes out of anything else, until after we close all of the components and everything's, you know, settled out at the end.

Paul Brady: The 35 million, is that just for the regular component?

Keri Stark: It is, yes.

Paul Brady: Do you have any idea how long you expect that to last at the current expenditure rate?

Keri Stark: We are tracking that closely, and our goal is to have that last until April 11th if we can. That's our goal. Again, these are plans and projections.

Paul Brady: It's influenced by a lot of factors. I was thinking about it, and I thought I would ask.

Keri Stark: Absolutely. No, yeah, thank you. Thank you, yeah. Any other questions on that part before we move on? I'm still going to be talking about it; I just didn't know if you had any other specific questions.

So again, so applicants that did not receive a regular benefit that applied in that three-day time period where we were closed ... We are reevaluating them for regular benefit. This includes households that were denied because regular was closed. This also includes households that did not receive a regular benefit and were also denied for an emergency benefit.

So as you know, we did keep emergency open. Emergency's still open, but if somebody came in and applied for emergency during the time period in which we were closed for regular, and they were denied because emergency has additional eligibility criteria, we are looking back at those households now and reevaluating them for a regular benefit. We're also looking at households that did not receive a regular benefit this program year and were approved for an emergency benefit during that three-day window. Those households are also being evaluated for a regular benefit now in addition to the emergency benefit they just received.

So as I said stated, we are still open for emergency. Emergency opened on January 2nd. We have two emergency benefits open right now, the first and second emergencies. We're only seeing first emergency benefits so far, mostly. As those benefits are exhausted, we will start to see an increase in second emergency applications. Last year, we did not open second emergency until March 22nd. And again, there's no wait period for somebody who has exhausted their first emergency benefit and ends up in an emergency situation again, they have the ability to apply for the second emergency at that time.

And overall, our emergency applications are slightly down as compared to last year, but it's still early to tell. Our HERR, our heating equipment repair and replacement and clean and tune benefits are still operating and spending is close to what it was this time last year, so that's pretty consistent as of right now. We are still planning on opening cooling on April 15th. As outlined in our state plan, we have allocated 15 million. That's what we have available for cooling. Last year, we did have an additional 7 million from NYSEDA, but we do not expect that this year. I just want to give everybody the heads-up for that, where we have 15 million for cooling; we do not expect to have any additional money for cooling.

So our 24-25 benefits, just to give you a little snapshot of where we are as of 1/24, for regular, we issued about 1.5 million in benefits, about 260 million expenditures. Again, as of 1/24/25, for our first emergency, we had about 19,000 benefits issued, which was about \$11.3 million, and our second emergency was at around 150 benefits, and that was about \$88,000. HERR, we had about a thousand benefits at that point in time for a total of \$3.4 million expended. Clean and tune was about 2,200 benefits issued and about 700,000 expended.

So next, I'm going to move on and talk about our utility data sharing agreement. So as you all were aware, as part of Social Services Law 131-ss, OTDA developed a ping system method to data match with utility information for enrollment into utility energy affordability programs, also known as our EAPs. The application programming interface, which we refer to as our API service, was moved to production on 12/20/24. By law, we were instructed to have that available by 12/22/24, so we did get that in ahead of the deadline.

All utilities have been notified of the availability of the API, but utilities do need to sign a data agreement with OTDA to use the API. We did draft an agreement and provided that to utilities to sign in order to use the API, but we have received some more additional comments back from utilities on the agreement that the OTDA ... we're working through those now. We hope to have a revised agreement soon.

And we have also heard from a number of utilities that in order to implement this new API process, they need time on their end to program changes and make changes to their existing systems to accommodate

the new API. In order to accommodate the utilities, we're going to continue to provide them with our SFTP file of HEAP recipients in their service territories until they have time to execute the data usage agreement and make the necessary changes on their end to implement.

So, monitoring. I think, Commissioner Pospesel, we were in Greene County this week. Monitoring began this week and will finish up in May. The HEAP Bureau will monitor 15 districts. Historically, we've monitored 10 districts... oh, sorry, go ahead.

Kira Pospesel: Yeah, and your team was lovely. We had them locked away in room 154, and they were very gracious. Thank you.

Keri Stark: Oh, good. Yeah, we actually very much enjoy getting out to the districts. That's a nice change of pace for our staff, so we do appreciate your hospitality when we do come out there. It's appreciated.

So, we normally monitor 10 districts per year. We did increase our number of districts that we're monitoring this year in order to reduce the length of time between reviews for smaller districts. We monitor five of the top 10 districts each year, so our top districts are usually monitored every other year, but the remaining districts we do on a rotating basis. And so we decided to monitor more counties each year, and so that will hopefully shorten the rotation and timeframe so that we can get out to the districts more frequently. So, the counties that we are monitoring this year are, of course, Greene, Broome, Dutchess, Fulton, Madison, Niagara, Oneida, Orange, Rockland, Saratoga, Schuylar, Sullivan, Wayne, Westchester, and Wyoming. So, that's our list of monitoring districts.

So, just a little update on our federal reports; OTDA submitted our households served report and that was accepted by HHS. Our performance measures report for FFY 24 is currently under review by management and will be submitted soon to HHS, and I'm not sure if you're all familiar with that, but that's the report that we use. It aids us in determining an energy burden for households based on their income and heating type, and we use that also in the development of our annual state plan, which brings us next to our state plan.

So for 25-26, we will be starting the process very soon for developing that plan. We will be conducting our needs assessment for the 25-26 HEAP season in March. That will include public hearings. And last year, we had made the change where we moved our hearings from August to April, March-April timeframe, so that allowed individuals the ability to comment on the last year's plan, and so then we can use those comments as our basis for looking at this upcoming plan.

So, let's see. Our public hearings have been tentatively set for Tuesday, April 15th and Thursday, April 17th, and our plan is to hold those via Webex. We do usually schedule, on each of those days, two Webexes, for a total of four. We have one in the morning and one in the evening on

each of those days usually, so we can provide the opportunity for people to attend when their schedule allows them. Our current plan is available for review on our website as well as on HHS's website.

And we plan our program without knowing what our funding will be for the next year. Normally and in the past, historically, we assume our LIHEAP funding will approximately the same year-to-year, but with future funding being less certain, we do anticipate the need to operate a more conservative program going forward. We have not received any word at this time on potential funding for FFY 26.

Okay, and so lastly, I did just want to ask ... I know our next BGAC meeting will be on May 1st. I know we did talk about going to one in-person meeting per year, so I did just want to get some feedback on whether you'd like to do that in May, or we can schedule that for the August meeting. So, if you want to think about that and let us know, that would be great. Okay, so that concludes my updates, and I can turn it back to you, Ken. Thank you.

Ken Gossel: Thank you so much, Keri. Is there a preference for May or August by the participants here?

Paul Brady: Hey, they're warm weather months, so I don't mind being out on either one of them.

Kira Pospesel: Well, I was thinking, when is the parking better in Albany?

Keri Stark: I don't know if it's ever good, actually. Yeah, I think that May or August ... I don't think it will make a difference.

Vivvy Williams: Well, how about if we aim for May, and then if we miss it, then at least we can do it in August?

Keri Stark: Okay, that sounds good.

Kira Pospesel: Okay.

Keri Stark: Thank you.

Ken Gossel: Yeah, that sounds great. Keri, I would like to ask ... I know with the budget uncertainty and you mentioning, I guess, the potential for a more conservative plan, do you have just some thoughts that you've been kicking around as to what that would look like at all, and what figures you would base it off of?

Keri Stark: We actually have not discussed that yet. We're going to be starting that very soon. We are going to be taking a deep analysis and look at prior years and pre-pandemic years where the funding was more right-sized to what we could expect to get, and seeing where the funds went, how much



was spent, what was allocated to what. We do want to do a deep analysis on that, basically, based on a lot of the time before the pandemic, and then we're going to have to talk internally. Nothing has really been thrown around yet. I know we did increase our benefits during the pandemic. We did have additional funds to do that. So that may be something we have to look at, the amount of the benefits, but there will be a number of different factors that we have to look at.

Ken Gossel: Thank you. I recall one might've been that they decreased from 15 to 10%, maybe, the weatherization monies that were assigned. But thank you, I appreciate it. Your team, I know, will continue to push in Washington with others, and we all are behind efforts to get as much money as possible to assist the clients and our customers, so thank you so much for that.

Keri Stark: Thank you. Thank you, too.

Ken Gossel: Open discussion. Is there new business that anyone would like to discuss?

Kira Pospesel: I was curious to find out what are we doing about getting additional members? It seems like I don't see too many new faces.

Keri Stark: No, we have put forward a nominee to the Commissioner's Office prior to the last meeting, and we're still waiting for approval on that. I believe we also issued letters out to the Assembly and the Senate soliciting interest as well. But I will follow up on that again. I'm sorry about that. We can follow up on that.

Vivvy Williams: Yes, there's nothing. Nothing came in, Keri, in regards to that.

Keri Stark: Okay. Thanks, Vivvy. Yeah, I'll follow up, maybe about the letters too. Thanks.

Ken Gossel: Any other items? If not, our remaining schedule, as you mentioned, May 1st, Thursday, hopefully in studio. If not, August 7th, our following meeting, and the final for 25 is November 6th of this year. If there's no other business, I would entertain a motion to adjourn.

Paul Brady: So moved.

Ken Gossel: And second?

Kira Pospesel: I'll second it.

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

Paul Brady: Aye.

Kira Pospesel: Aye.

Ken Gossel: And the meeting is concluded. Thank you, everybody, for participating, and all of your hard work to bring this needed assistance here in the state. So thank you very much, enjoy your winter, and be safe.

Keri Stark: Okay.

Kira Pospesel: Thank you so much.

Keri Stark: Thank you so much.

Paul Brady: Thank you.

Diana Yang: Have a great weekend. Bye.

Ken Gossel: You as well.

Keri Stark: Bye.