

Portland Utility Board

October 26, 2016 12 – 2pm
Peninsula Park Room, Portland Building

Attendees:

PUB Members:

Allan Warman
Janet Hawkins
Meredith Connolly

Staff:

Cecelia Huynh (Director of Finance and Support Services, Water)
Gabe Solmer (Communications Director, Water)
Liam Frost (Policy Director, Commissioner Fish's Office)
Claudio Campuzano (Principal Analyst, City Budget Office)
Ryan Kinsella (Senior Analyst, City Budget Office)
Melissa Merrell (Principal Analyst, City Budget Office)
Kathy Koch (Customer Service Manager, Water)
Jenny Scott (Senior Management Auditor, Audit Services)

Public:

Janice Thompson (Citizen Utility Board)
Carol Cushman (League of Women Voters)

I. Call to Order, Introduction of Any Audience Members

Janet opened the meeting with introductions and set goals for the meeting: to reflect on past work of the low income discount subcommittee, discuss possible changes in the program, and set a plan for the next few months.

She framed the conversation in context of the webinar, "[Public Utilities, Racial Equity, and Environmental Justice: Opportunities and Challenges](#)," hosted by The Local and Regional Alliance on Race and Equity. The webinar can be viewed [here](#). Janet remarked that it seemed timely to return to the discussion and start discussing some of the unresolved issues.

Jenny Scott from the Auditor's Office provided an update on her work. She said it should be finished early in the calendar year and she expects that it will provide context for the discussion. She has done data analysis from the Cayenta billing service, conducted surveys with water customers, and done other research.

Kathy Koch provided update on the program outreach:

- The bureau is trying to make it easy for honored citizens – aged and disabled – by eliminating the need to renew every two years as their income situations aren't expected to change over time.

- They are providing additional training on crisis voucher eligibility to be used more frequently as a tool.
- They have given the program manager, Brad Blake, the authority to override eligibility requirements for applicants who just miss the guidelines.
- They have talked about increasing the median family income (MFI) that is used for the eligibility threshold (currently 60% MFI).
- They are exploring the issue of offering a way to applying online. The bureau has been working with BTS to provide secure format.
- They are reaching out proactively to encourage renewals.
- They are reaching out to neighborhood associations to offer to do presentations. So far, they have done three presentations.
- Several attendees offered additional outreach suggestions: providing information with Free and Reduced Lunch materials, peachjar, parent-teach conference nights, Fix-It Fairs, NextDoor, and district coalition websites.
- The bureau has also been encouraging people that don't qualify to sign up for monthly billing.

Janet noted that some people have challenges with inconsistent incomes. She also raised the fact that many low- and moderate-income families don't have computers and use their mobile device as computer. Gabe agreed and said that was one of the reasons they were trying to get online applications. There are some information barriers around privacy and how the city could collect the income verification and personal data it needs and hold them in a secure manner. Gabe suggested that PUB communicating some of the outreach hurdles to BTS would be helpful. Janet asked if there was consensus whether that made sense. There seemed to be consensus.

Melissa asked if there was some way to leverage the County's access as they are already collecting data and keeping it securely. Janet noted that the County's providers might be able to assist.

Gabe said this request was not high on the BTS priority list and that the bureau has not yet received answers regarding the barriers. Kathy explained that the challenges stem from the way BTS is set up. Melissa asked if there was some way to leverage Invoice Cloud. Kathy responded no – that is a payment only platform.

Janet suggested that Van Le might be able to help. It was agreed to bring the BTS TBC to a future meeting.

Meredith asked about the capacity to track success in outreach. Gabe noted they would be able to correlate efforts to monthly changes in the customer population.

Kathy said that right now, the bureau doesn't know how old customers are or whether they are disabled. In the future, they'll be able to say which category customers are in.

Janet and Meredith discussed whether they should return back to their original recommendations or how they want to move forward. They agreed that they should think about the next steps. Janet suggested that they wait for the findings of the upcoming low income discount audit. Janet also suggested that the subcommittee consider additional equity training before taking the next steps. Meredith suggested that PUB meet with users of the program in order to better understand the services.

Kathy mentioned that she may know of customers who be willing to share their experience.

Gabe suggested that the subcommittee meet with community providers at a future subcommittee meeting.

Liam mentioned that the Commissioner is eager to expand the program and fully utilized the budgeted amount. The bureau is planning on sending out a mailer in the next few months to customers that may benefit from the program.

Meredith suggested that the subcommittee reduce the number of options in the matrix in order to focus on the options of most interest to PUB. Janet suggested that some of the options may not be reasonable, such as eliminating the program, and so this option should be dropped. PUB members indicated that they have preferences for the different options.

Allan asked Meredith about Kendra's concerns of the program. Meredith explained that the concern was raised that the program is inherently inequitable because the only customers who can receive the benefit are those who directly receive bills (mostly those who reside in single family homes) because of the limitations in metering.

Melissa asked about how many customers were enrolled in the program. Kathy said that they are at 6,700. Melissa asked if they had any data about how many leave the program during the enrollment period. Kathy said that they did not track this data.

Melissa asked about where the 10,000 target came from. Cecelia explained that the figure is based on prior year projections of the number of customers who may enroll. The actual number of enrollees has been less.

Melissa asked when the bureau could provide updated data on the number of enrollees. Kathy explained the number of enrollees are tracked monthly, but depending upon when a customer receives their bill and decide to enroll, the effectiveness of the outreach may be hard to track in the short term.

Claudio suggested that the bureau may want to contact the What Works Cities Behavioral Insight team about possible modifications to the mailer.

Janet asked about the status of the communications staff position that was added in the last budget process to assist with the program. Gabe explained that they won't be filling that position until after the new communication's director is hired, sometime early next year.

The subcommittee laid out this plan for future meetings and asked Melissa to coordinate. Some content may change with presenter availability.

November 16, 12pm – 2pm:	Equity conversation (webinar and the follow-up with City staff)
January 25, 12– 2pm:	IT, Robert Killingham, Water will send a rep
February 22, 12– 2pm	Users and providers; outreach reports
March TBD	Audit Findings

Allan asked if there was a fee associated with program. Cecelia explained that this was incorporated into rates. Allan asked if it would be possible to get monthly enrollment numbers over the past five years. It would also be helpful to compare these figures with changes in the economy.

Melissa asked what additional resources were needed. Meredith asked for research on participation rates in different underrepresented communities – section 8 housing and low income program. Janet requested reminder emails and that they be sent to the full PUB.

Public Comment

Janice asked Jenny if she had met with users as part of the audit process. Jenny explained that they had met with enrollees, persons impacted by shutoffs, and different stakeholders as part of their process. They received approximately 70 survey responses. Janice suggested that the group wait to hear more about the audit before making any final decisions.

Janice also raised concerns about eliminating options without full PUB approval. Janet responded that they will recommended all changes to the PUB. Janice also suggested that the subcommittee look at how the state allocates funding for low income discount to energy customers and the availability of federal funds.