



Equity Advisory Group – Equity Lens Session #1

Meeting Date: October 15, 2021
Time: 7:30am – 9:00am
Location: Zoom Meeting

Attendees:

<i>Facilitator:</i>	<i>EAG Members:</i>
Amber Lenhart	Margee Chambers, Spokane Clean Air
<i>Avista:</i>	Connie Kliewer, NEWESD101
Annette Brandon	Ryann Louie, Reimagine Spokane & Asian Pacific Islander Coalition
Ana Matthews	Jessie Twigg-Harris, Small Business Owner/Community Member
Renee Coelho	Adell Whitehead, Martin Luther King Center
Jaime Majure	Larry Mattson, Jacobs
Mikaela Terpko	Michele Bennington, Community Member
Amanda Ghering	Brook Beeler, Department of Ecology
<i>Guests:</i>	Jupiter McGee, Community Member and Organizer
John Rothlin – Avista	Vanessa Strange, Spokane Public Library
Darrel Soyars – Avista	

Agenda

- I. Welcome & Introductions
 - Overview of Meeting: Rules and Intent
- II. Customer Benefit Indicators
- III. CETA Section 12
- IV. Bill Assistance
- V. Weatherization
- VI. Energy Assistance and Named Communities
- VII. Outreach and Engagement
- VIII. Discussion
- IX. Your Support Team and Next Meeting

Facilitator

Amber Lenhart
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Mikaela Terpko & Mike Gump
Ana Matthews & Renee Coelho
Amber Lenhart
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Meeting Notes

Customer Benefit Indicators (CBIs)

Really wanting to close the loop to ensure you know how we used your input or, if the final CBIs didn't look exactly like what you suggested, why we landed where we did.

- Environmental
 - Reduce polluting emissions and locational environmental impacts – will be measured by # of weighted average days exceeding health levels and Avista plant air emissions. Not as intuitive as initially thought - ability to measure at a locational area, etc. is something that we're still trying to figure

out, and even the City of Spokane is still dealing with that. So, these will be good starting points for us, though they are a little bit different than where we started. In the last year, in addition to CETA there was also the Climate Commitment Act [that will be written into rule 2022] and requires Ecology to take some actions. We tried to set ourselves up to use what we have now, but then be able to grab on to what gets developed that may be relevant to the communities we serve. We've also talked about mobile monitoring.

- Access
 - # of households reached by broadband internet. We realize how important this is for you and on many other levels, but we just don't have a way to measure it at this point. So, we are going to continue to work on it. So how will we help with this CBI? More fully develop Joint Use (partner with internet/broadband companies), work with communities, and TBD, as we just really haven't figured it all out yet. Will come back to this group again about this topic.
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- Areas where we did develop CBIs, but hope to gain more granularity: Energy Burden (instead of # customer with burden, measure more specific to Named Communities); Energy Availability (instead of CAIDI, identify additional methods to measure outages and communicate); Indoor Air Quality (going to try to find a bit more information on asthma and other ideas stakeholders provided us, as the info we were able to find was a bit stale. **Q:** what does it mean that the data was stale? **A:** it was just old data, from around 2016, so we just want to make sure we're getting information that is more current and that was more consistent.); Supplier Diversity (more specificity in ensuring that suppliers are in, owned, or serving Named Communities).
Q: It was reported in the news that gas is going to go up, heating in the home increasing up to 180%, is that going to be considered with the energy burden components of this work? **A:** There's two parts to that question. I can't speak to that increase, but energy burden takes into consideration those cost implications. When someone gets financial aid on their bill, the actual costs their incurring go into it. Those benefits are based on the last year's use, but as the costs go up it will be reflected.

Energy Assistance

- CETA was enacted in 2019, and has an entire section dedicated to energy assistance (EA). Traditionally EA was what benefit we provided to help customers with their bill, but CETA changed that definition to include weatherization. Energy burden: more than 6% of income spent on energy bill is a high burden; customers should be spending less than 6% to have a manageable bill. Customers in poverty can be paying anywhere from 21% upwards just for energy. So, as we look at CETA we want to make sure that we're being really conscious and methodical about negating the impact to these customers. We also have to be constantly assessing how many customers are actually receiving these benefits, our reach, and making progress to serving 60% of that population by 2030 and 90% by 2050.

- There are five (5) different bill assistance funding sources for customers, each with different eligibility requirements (laws, rules, guidelines in how to access the benefit, and how that benefit can help people).
 - Federal program: LIHEAP, around since 1980s
 - In late 1990s, utility tariff programs came around. Avista's tariff funded (a fee that's on your rate, kind of like a tax, that customers contribute to pay for these programs): Low-Income Rate Assistance Program (LIRAP), supplements LIHEAP
 - One of the biggest things about LIRAP is the importance in education: how energy use is occurring in their home and what they can do to manage their situation. Education, information, and resources to make a difference in their energy use.
 - LIRAP Goals: We never want a customer to experience disconnection in services, we always want to be serving more customers than before, and we always want to make sure we have data to help report out on the effectiveness of the programs.
 - **Q:** Is this program applicable to self-sufficiency via bill assistance or wage?
 - **A:** Bill Assistance such as LIRAP Sub-Programs help customers in various ways: Heat (we know certain customers need help with their bill, so here is a benefit to help); Senior/Disabled Rate Discount, Energy Grant, Emergency Share Grant (customers in crisis), Arrearage Management Program (to help pay off past due balances, takes 90% of what you owe, spreads it over 12 months, and for every payment you make towards the remaining 10% we'll pay the other 90%). CETA raised the benefit qualifications to a little bit higher income. We are in the process of looking at our LIRAP programs to potentially modify the design to best serve our customers.
 - **Q:** If customer is evicted, does their balance follow them?
 - **A:** Yes, unpaid balances do follow the customer. There is a multitude of assistance available from federal funds and otherwise, for utilities, rent, etc.
 - Before CETA, we used Federal Poverty Level for income eligibility guidelines; CETA expanded to 200% FPL or 80% AMI, whichever is higher.
 - Donation-based Project Share
 - That money comes to us, but we're just a pass-through, we don't administer.
 - Community fuel fund – this is not an Avista program, so it's not just helping Avista customers with Avista bill, some other utilities participate (Inland, etc.). SNAP administers under their 503C.
 - Tax credit/CARES donation that we put back out into the community like MKL Center, churches, food banks, etc.
 - Various funding from churches, social service agencies, government, etc. It's not their primary function, but they step in and help people pay their bills when possible.

- We partner with Agencies, who then administer these programs. These partnerships have been in place since we established programs—recently, we’ve expanded to the tribes so that where possible they also administer the programs to provide assistance to customers.
- This funding available and we are doing our best to get it out into the community—if you have any thoughts about how we can provide better ease in access or get these funds out to customers, please do let us know.

Weatherization (Wx)

- We provide \$3M annually to eight (8) community action agencies and the Spokane Indian Housing Authority, to deliver energy conservation as well as energy efficiency improvements to homes. Partner with the same agencies as bill assistance, as they have the expertise and training to bring these services to customers. We do not have customer income data.
- A lot of Wx customers come in through the Agencies—while the intake worker is helping the customer get energy assistance, they will talk about the state of the home, etc. and refer the customer for Wx.
- Our program serves owner-occupied homes that use Avista electric or natural gas, does not cover alternative fuels like wood, pellet, etc.; rentals can be served, as long as landlord participates.

Q: How do you get the landlord to participate? **A:** This is something we have struggled with for a long time. If you get a landlord that is just using the property for income, isn’t looking to maintain or make improvements—if the landlord doesn’t want to participate, there is nothing we can do to get their permission and it’s the renter that pays the brunt (the utility bill). It’s a really tough spot as well, as maybe the landlord will also get all these improvements done that, they weren’t willing to do themselves then they’ll sell the home. So yes, it’s a very small percentage of participants that we see, and if you have any suggestions to improve this access, we are definitely open to it because this is a huge issue.

Q: Does rentals include leasing? **A:** We don’t hear about leasing much, as it usually comes in under the term “rentals”, but I will double-check with the agencies for you.
- Agencies can also tap into multiple funding sources for Wx projects from the federal gov’t; they take a holistic look at the home and marry up funds for multiple measures.
- Wx is a tariffed program, like LIRAP. Improvements can include conversions (baseboard to electric heat pump), replacing lights, insulation, windows, furnaces, water heaters, etc. that may be impacting the efficiency of the home.

- We also pay attention to “Is there anything in the home that could be a Health and Safety issue?” We do have dollars allocated for these things.

Outreach & Engagement

- We have a robust outreach team. Energy Fairs and energy assistance days (people can come get a meal and get some free weatherization materials like weather stripping, window plastic, etc.), mobile and general outreach, vans, workshops, print/digital ads (tv, press release, radio, whatever we can get to connect people to this information), social media, and inserts. We understand that our customers may be living in crisis, so connecting with our customers is extremely important to us. If there’s an event out in the community (that has CDC guidelines in place), or anywhere someone invites us to come, we’re there.
- **Q:** Based on the mailers, do you know how many people you’ve reached, as not everyone reads their mail? **A:** we do ask the Agencies to let us know if/when they see an increase after an email or mailer. Inserts are mixed, but emails definitely get the calls coming in.
- **Q:** Did you say drive-through food banks? **A:** Yes, with COVID we’ve been participating in those. People line up in their cars, pop their trunk and in goes food and some weatherization goods, etc.
- **Q:** Can it say somewhere on their bill, by the total, where they can get assistance? **A:** Yes, we do include information about assistance on the bill messages, and if someone gets to a notice, we have that information on there as well. Sometimes people don’t check their mail though—so we have phone calls, etc. We know that at least 90% of customers they do contact us once they get a notice, but we still have that 10-ish % that just don’t respond.
- We’re just trying to find the best or most efficient ways to reach people where they are. Avista referrals through our CSRs, Customer Assistance Referral Evaluation Services (CARES) dept works with our most vulnerable customers that may need some additional help or resources due to medical, life support, or some other emergency. Or we’ll refer customers to the Agencies if we run into a customer while we’re out in the communities, or an Avista employee encounters someone that may need more help, we can funnel that info to the Agencies to try to get them some resources.
- As a way to try to reach more customers, this summer (2021), we took a neighborhood sweep approach—worked with SNAP to identify two organizations that could use extra help: one non-profit housing organization (knew we had bill assistance, but didn’t know we have Wx). These customers are all known low-income customers, so we waived the traditional income-eligibility Wx paperwork, since the Agency already had that information. So being able to treat communities like this as a group as an approach we’re looking at moving forward. The other organization is a mobile home community (resident owned). A lot of them have participated in assistance or Wx, but a lot of them fell just outside of the eligibility gap—they make too much to receive a free service, but they don’t make enough to afford the improvements on their own. We’re trying to find a way to help them as well—we’ve waived the paperwork again here and trying to find a way to move forward in a different way to bring these dollars to the customers that need them.

- **Q:** Are you working with World Relief or Islamic communities at all? **A:** Not for this project, but we have worked with them before. I know specifically we've done workshops at World Relief. We've also done English as a Second Language workshops, and we're always open to new partnerships.
- **Q:** Who do you contact at Avista if a rural community might want to host or invite an outreach team to town? **A:** Contact Ana Matthews.

Named Communities

- Provided map and breakdown of communities identified as Named Communities (NC's), and breakdown of these areas, as well as bill assistance utilization among these customers. About 51% is utilized in these named communities. Spokane County appears well-served by assistance, with 19% being served in these communities vs. 12% elsewhere.
- Comment: It's impactful to see how many of Avista's communities are above that 80% threshold.
- Number of customers that have been assisted overall vs. those in NC's: Those living in NC's are clearly in need of bill assistance, as we're seeing these saturation rate ranges from 21-25% in general, and 11-12% in NC's.
- **Q:** How has Avista partnered with outreach at DSHS? **A:** We really look to SNAP to establish that relationship, as they are really receptive to Agencies, so SNAP is the facilitator of that relationship in Spokane County.
- Any other thoughts on how we can better serve/reach these named communities?
- A suggestion was made to share information about these programs at Spokane City Neighborhood Action Councils.
- **A:** I think of internet access and mobility as often prohibiting folks who are in rural places from even connecting with the hub organizations. Which is why I think of libraries, chambers of commerce, churches. As hyper local orgs to connect with.

In 2016, 46% of our *savings* for EE came from named communities, and around 45% of the *participants* came from these communities. Not quite 50%, so we've still got some work to do, but it's good to see we're actually having some reach in these Named Communities.

The meeting ended with comment that while we had limited time today, we do want to hear from you about today's discussions. Where do you feel there are barriers or access issues keeping everyone from experiencing the benefits of these programs?