

HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday, February 2, 2023

A meeting of the Block Grant Advisory Council was held via WebEx on Thursday, February 2, 2023. The meeting began at 1:00 pm.

Attendees

Andy Stone, Executive Director, NYS Weatherization Directors Association

Jeffrey Hanford, NYS OTDA HEAP

Kenneth Gossel, National Fuel Gas

Kira Pospesel, Commissioner, Greene County Social Services

Shiran Ybanez, HEAP, HRA

Vivvy Williams, BGAC secretary

Discussion

Ken Gossel: Good afternoon, everybody. Vivvy, are we connected?

Vivvy Williams: I think we are connected but I will make sure.

Ken Gossel: Well, welcome, all to the February 2nd, 2023, HEAP Block Grant Advisory Council meeting. I'm glad you could join us today. My name is Ken Gossel, I am the vice-chairman and since we are participating by WebEx today have everybody identify themselves who is participating. Thank you.

Jeffrey Hanford: Jeffrey Hanford, Temporary Assistant Specialist 2 from OTDA HEAP Bureau.

Vivvy Williams: Vivvy Williams the Secretary for the BGAC meeting.

Andy Stone: I'm Andy Stone the Executive Director of the New York State Weatherization Director's Association.

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

Shiran Ybanez: My name is Shiran Ybanez, I'm the acting Director of HEAP New York City.

Ken Gossel: I believe that's it. Thanks to all for joining today. We are going to start off with updates to the 2022/23 HEAP Program year and Jeffrey, I will pass it off to you please.

Jeffrey Hanford: Alright, thank you. November 1st, 2022, we had the base Block Grant funding of \$342,866,235.00 released. That was 90% of the total award. We are projecting 100% will be about \$380 million. We received the total amount of the supplemental funding \$63 plus million and the infrastructure funding which is \$6.3 million. At this point, there have been no changes to the component dates. Regular opened on November 1st and is projected to close no earlier than March 15, 2023. Emergency opened on January 3rd and again is projected to close no earlier than March 15, 2023. The HERR program has been open for the full HEAP season since October 3rd and will run through the end of the season September 29, 2023. Same for Clean and Tune. And the Cooling program will open May 1, 2023 and run, we're projecting, to August 31, 2023.

So, a little more in depth with the regular benefit component. That opened on November 1, 2022, and again, it's scheduled to operate through March 15th. Since opening, we've determined with the supplemental emergency funding in the amount of \$63 million that we could increase the regular benefit components. So, oil, kerosene, and propane increased from \$900 to \$1050. That is an increase of \$150. Wood, coal, and other deliverables increased from \$635 to \$685. That will be an increase of \$50. And the natural gas or electric heat increased from \$400 to \$500. That's an increase of \$100. Anybody that received the lower amount before the systems were changed on December 11th, is scheduled to receive a supplement to the original benefit automatically by a mass authorization that is scheduled to occur on February 25th for rest of state and New York City is going to occur a little sooner than that.

There were no changes to the Tier 1 add-on or the vulnerable add-on or any of the Heat included as a result as a result of the supplemental funding. As of January 20th, 2023, \$1.2 million benefits were issued through the autopay for the regular in the amount of \$175.85 million, and we've processed 191,000 applications for a total of \$70.7 million, for a total award amount of \$1.4 million vs. the \$1.3 million that we had issued at this point last year. The total amount awarded is \$246.5 million vs. last year issuances of \$205.7 million, so that's a 20% increase in the dollar amount out the door from the same point last year. The average non-renter's benefit amount award was \$595 this year vs. \$496 last year. Any questions on the regular component?

Kira Pospesel: Jeffrey, can I just quickly ask you, it sounds like the numbers this year compared to last year monetary are we over? Is it also the applications, were they over too from the prior year?

Jeffrey Hanford: I would have to double check. I didn't break those down. I know the total amount between auto pay and applications is higher, but I would have to look and see.

Kira Pospesel: Okay. And the reason I ask is interesting because last night I was looking at something and I kept saying for the winter so far it's been a mild winter for Upstate New York

and every day actually in the month of January was above average in like major ways. You know, sometimes like 30 degrees average over average. So, they were saying it's really going to help us with our fuel oil, and I kept thinking what I'm seeing here that is not what I'm seeing. So, you're only reinforcing what I've been seeing here in my lobby here in Greene County, is that we're seeing newer faces, newer applications even though people are considering it a mild winter, so thank you.

Jeffrey Hanford: I'm looking right now, and it looks like the autopay and the application both increased from last year, they are both up.

Ken Gossel: No other questions, and Jeffrey, Emergency segment for HEAP.

Jeffrey Hanford: Yep, so, Emergency opened on January 3rd, 2023, projected to run through March 15th, 2023. At this time still just one emergency scheduled. We will evaluate going forward and if there's any changes, we'll certainly notify you, but as of right now, there's just the one that's been scheduled. Oil, kerosene, propane emergency \$900, wood, coal, other deliverables \$635, natural gas \$400, and electric heat or natural gas/electric heat combined \$585, and heat related domestic \$185. Those benefits from last year's emergency were decreased by \$65 with the exception of the heat related domestic temperature relocation and the propane tank deposit which remained the same from the prior year. I know in the previous meeting; we had discussed potentially increasing the maximum fees allowable for the deliverable vendors that they can charge for after hours and off-route deliveries. So, they have been increased from \$100, I'll grab the number for you after, but they have both been increased. At this point, we have issued 19,000 emergency benefits in the amount of \$13.3 million. That is up from 14,5000 benefits that we had issued at this point last year and the amount of \$13 million. So, a significant increase in the number of emergency benefits and about a 2.3% increase in the dollar amount of benefits issued. The average emergency benefit at this point last year was \$895, this year it's a lower average amount of \$705. Are there any questions on the emergency?

Ken Gossel: I just wanted to ask and it applies also the regular benefit, I know you mentioned that at this point in time, those programs closed no sooner than March 15th. When do you think you will know whether there are available funds to continue those programs, and also, I guess the point I'd like to make is as much advance notice as possible to the vendors and whatnot would be helpful in our messaging to customers and clients. Do you have an indication when that type of determination might be made on an extension of the closing?

Jeffrey Hanford: That's something I would have to discuss with Emily and Andrew before I gave an answer. But generally, we need to give as much time as possible to give our systems team a chance to get the programming done. But I can get you a better answer on that.

Ken Gossel: Great, and very important, obviously for the district offices to know that as well, and as much time as possible to communicate to all of us is just helpful for our planning as well. So, thank you very much.

Jeffrey Hanford: Yes. Alright, if there are no other questions, I'll go into the Heater Equipment Repair and Replace. So, again that operates year-round, \$10 million allocated to the benefit. This year, we increased the maximum amounts allowable \$4,000 for the repairs, \$8,000 for the replacements. At this point, we've done 237 repairs with an average of \$1,045 for the repair vs. \$853 last year. We've done 462 replacements at an average cost of \$4,950 vs. \$4,192 average last year. So, that's a total of 699 benefits in the amount of \$4.2 million. If there are no other questions, I'll go onto the Clean and Tune?

So, we've seen a decrease increase in the number of Clean and Tunes. The maximum amount allowable was increased by \$100 and this year we've done 1,750 Clean and Tunes for a total of \$525,000 vs. this time last year when we had done 1,300 for \$343,000. So, the numbers both of the benefit and the dollar amount have both increased pretty significantly on that. Average amount spent on the job this year was \$300 vs. \$263 amount last year.

Cooling assistance – nothing really since the last meeting. It is scheduled to open May 1st, 2023, scheduled to operate through August 31st, 2023. \$15 million is allocated to it, a drop from \$23 million that was available last year. We've reinstated the need for the medication condition, so these households are prioritized. Households with members under the age of 6 or over the age of 60 or older qualify without an additional medical need. New York City is offering an online application platform for cooling this year, that's the first time that has been available online for HEAP. The maximum benefit is going to be \$800 for window and portable units. This year we increased the maximum to \$1,000 for existing sleeve units. Having the ERPA funds last year allowed us to remove the medical condition because of the additional funds. So, without this year, we had to put the medical condition back in. Extreme heat remains a high priority topic. In government, we're hoping for additional funds to support utility benefits in the summer months to operating the cooling equipment, and more funds to be able to provide more conditioners to households.

Kira Pospesel: Can I just ask you a question about that? That program is going to close on August 1st?

Jeffrey Hanford: August 31st.

Kira Pospesel: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Jeffrey Hanford: As far as the State Plan goes, we are in the beginning phase of preparing the 23/24 HEAP State Plan. Later this spring, we are going to announce our needs assessment comment period and the Council will be notified when the needs assessment period begins.

And the last thing, I just wanted to mention that we're still looking for the interim Chair for the Council. Also, looking for additional members. So, if you have anyone that you would be interested in joining the Council, if you could please put the names forward to us.

Ken Gossel: Thanks Jeffrey.

Kira Pospesel: Clarification on the interim chair, were you able to make some sort of vote about that, so we could potentially vote in Ken for that spot?

Ken Gossel: I'd be happy to accept that, Kira. Although everybody else on here is equally qualified.

Kira Pospesel: Well, we have certainly witnessed you step up to the plate and certainly have appreciated it and you look very good on camera. So, I think that's quite a slate to run the campaign on.

Ken Gossel: So noted. I will consider a motion from the floor; do I have a second?

Andy Stone: Second.

Vivvy Williams: Third.

Ken Gossel: All in favor?

All: Aye

Ken Gossel: Any opposed? There being none, I am the lucky recipient for the job.

Kira Pospesel: We can solve a few problems every now and then, see.

Ken Gossel: Well, it's a great dwindling organization, but people with a lot of heart and who care about assisting others which is what it's all about and thank you for that. I wanted to ask, since we did ask at the last meeting, has there, Jeff, been any names or anything that had been submitted by way of recommendation or those that have expressed interest to start the process for appointment?

Jeffrey Hanford: Nothing officially. We have some ideas, but we would also be welcome to any input from the Council.

Vivvy Williams: Yes, not at this time Ken, but I'm looking into it right now in our agency in the legislative area of the steps that can be taken if anyone has any suggestions of bringing anymore members to the table. So, I'm listening to that right now. It's kind of new for me to find out those steps that we need to take to actually add on more people, to make this a little bigger and broader.

Ken Gossel: Great. I'd offer for the members if we wanted to have a discussion, try to meet in the next month, come up with some names, brainstorm, I would be all for that if there's an interest, I can try to set that up offline with you. Let me know and/or certainly, if you have people that are interested and would bring things to the table, please feel free to pass those along to OTDA and/or we can look to independently have them approach those who are making the appointments.

Kira Pospesel: So, I do have if I can just offer two suggestions that we're seeing happening on the frontlines that would be helpful when we look at the next state plan for OTDA to maybe keep in the back of their minds. I mentioned this at the previous meeting, but with the Mybenefits which is great that clients can do that, but the interesting thing that we're seeing the biggest negative behavior is that they'll hit the submit button and, of course, then there's not the supporting documentation, so then it ends up pending and they may kind of assume it's done. Then people don't read their mail when we send things out and it's still pending and so that's a problem. So, if we can somehow potentially look at Mybenefits and maybe have something pop up in red to remind them or say, please attach something, or do something so that whole entire case for the eligibility staff is in front of them when they take a look at it. That may make that easier.

The second thing that we've seen which is rather interesting, we give with one hand and take away with the other, with the social security increase, were seeing a large volume of cases being denied because they're \$200 over and that's because of the increase in their social security benefit. So, that's the first time we've seen that here where we've seen a large volume of cases that were being denied because of that additional social security monies. So, we're going to have to take a look at those income levels again too. And I rarely give out compliments because see, look, see it's because you're here today, Jeffrey. It's been a smooth season, and we've been really anticipating a bumpy season, but we've been able to manage things on the frontend. And, of course, we've made a lot of changes and it's been difficult in all the local districts because of staffing so, it seems like at least from the perspective from on the frontlines it seems to be okay. Now, I don't know if that's the same message that you're seeing from OTDA from the 35,000-foot level but we're certainly seeing services being delivered here and I'm not seeing complaints from clients or the community.

Jeffrey Hanford: Knock on wood.

Andy Stone: It may get bumpier this weekend Kira, it's going to be really cold, so I think we're probably going to see responses to no heat so. I apologize I froze up there for a minute, so I had to reload. I do have one quick question for you Jeffrey. Regarding the HERR component, has there been any interest or have any contractors approached you about switching fuels in response to the CLCPA or any other interest in contractors or vendors doing fuel switching?

Jeffrey Hanford: Not that I'm aware of. Most of the conversions that we see are more through NYSEDA than through us. But I haven't seen the vendors reaching out.

Andy Stone: But that's a direct response to the HERR program, that's through the funds that you're giving to NYSEDA?

Jeffrey Hanford: Correct.

Andy Stone: Alright. Vivvy, actually, I do have one person that's interested in getting on the Council. She's an employee of New York State Homes and Community Renewal. It probably

would be smart to have a member that represents HCR because you do fund them. It's Beth Ryan, Elizabeth Ryan, and I will contact her and let her know that I've thrown her, I have contacted her previously and I will let her know that I've formally nominated her.

Vivvy Williams: Yeah, and like I was saying, once we nominate people to be on the Board part of our member group, I'm trying to really figure out the next step that we have to take to move forward to get them.

Andy Stone: Looking back many, many years ago from when I got on, I think it's a Governor's appointment and I'm not sure exactly what that process was.

Vivvy Williams: But I will definitely find out from our Commissioner's Office of the next steps, and I will let everyone know.

Andy Stone: Okay.

Ken Gossel: Great, wonderful. Let me add one item of old business before I make a call for final new business, but I was hoping we could look at and improve the November 3rd, 2022, meeting minutes which Vivvy were excellent. I had no changes but want to throw it out to the others that had an opportunity to review and have any changes to it?

Kira Pospesl: I have no changes, so I'd offer you a motion to approve them.

Andy Stone: I'll second, Ken.

Vivvy Williams: Thank you very much.

Ken Gossel: Yes, excellent job. So, now, any calls for new business? Anything else you want to discuss before we end? There being nothing I will first say Jeffrey, you've got a record here of Andrew and Emily to beat and I just thanks everybody for participating. Be safe. Let me first mention the remaining dates for this year for meetings, sorry, I was neglecting to do that. May 4th, August 3rd and November 2nd are the remaining meetings for the year.

Andy Stone: Ken, before we close can I make a suggestion? Jeffrey, we spent an awful lot of time jotting down notes as you do your narrative on where everything stands, would it be possible to attach that with the minutes just so we've got a report of the activities, and that way it's just a review rather than us trying to, I've got hen scratch all over my agenda here. It might be helpful for us to get a one-page sheet of status on agenda statistics.

Jeffrey Hanford: I'll run that up and see.

Andy Stone: Okay thanks.

Ken Gossel: Great. That's all I had. Thank you all. Actually, I forgot to mention, we're planning Vivvy still the August 3rd meeting to be in person if those that can make it down...

Vivvy Williams: yes, in person in August.

Ken Gossel: Terrific. That being it, thank you all for participating today and joining in. Be safe. I know we've got some cold weather but thank you all for your assistance. And we'll see you in the spring.