



## Engaging Hard-to-Reach Clients

Outreach, according to LIHEAP statute's [Assurance 3](#), is required to assure that the most vulnerable and most in-need households are made aware of the assistance available to them from LIHEAP and other energy-related assistance programs. Neither LIHEAP statute nor regulations define what forms outreach may take, nor do they define which activities may be considered administrative or programmatic, which leaves the decision up to grantees. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services stated in [LIHEAP-IM-2000-12](#):

“outreach activities are not intrinsically administrative...The term [outreach] encompasses activities that are administrative and others that are not.”

Each year, LIHEAP grantees are asked to report on their outreach efforts in their LIHEAP Plans. Grantees may conduct outreach activities through their own offices, through local administrative agencies (LAAs), or both. Many grantees allow their LAAs to budget a certain amount of their LIHEAP funds specifically on outreach. Some outreach activities may overlap with the coordination activities required in [Assurance 4](#). That is, the grantee must:

“...coordinate its activities under this title with similar and related programs administered by the Federal Government and such State, particularly low-income energy-related programs...”

Similarly, some outreach activities may overlap with [Assurance 16](#), which allows grantees to use up to five percent of their yearly allocation to provide services that encourage and enable households to reduce their home energy needs. In addition to conducting services like needs assessments, a few LIHEAP grantees use mobile offices as outreach centers by taking them to communities or events to increase awareness of the program. They may even be used to perform intake services on location. They are especially useful when targeting households or communities that may be considered hard-to-reach because of their remote location or the lack of physical mobility of potential applicants.

A [review of the literature](#) indicates that other federal social programs find it challenging to serve eligible elderly house-



### Resources: Engaging Hard-to-Reach Clients

- Administration for Children and Families, [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\) Webinar: Social Media 101](#), September 16, 2016
- Office of Community Services' Division of Energy Assistance, [Experiences of Selected Federal Social Welfare Programs and State LIHEAP Programs in Targeting Vulnerable Elderly and Young Child Households](#), December 2008
- LIHEAP Clearinghouse, State Outreach, <https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/delivery/outreach.htm>
- LIHEAP Clearinghouse, Tribal Outreach, <https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/Tribes/delivery/outreach.htm>
- [2016 NEUAC Conference Presentations:](#)
  - ◆ Effective Strategy for Customer Outreach
  - ◆ Energy Assistance and Education: “21<sup>st</sup> Century Results = Customer Engagement,”
  - ◆ Outreach Projects: New Approaches Meeting Unique Challenges
  - ◆ Residential Engagement Energy Savings in Subsidized Public Housing

holds, especially in comparison to households with young children. Program participation barriers appear to be most significant when elderly households have not made previous use of public assistance programs.

### Hard-to-Reach Customers

There are many other factors that may make certain households hard-to-reach. Some potential contributing factors that will be discussed in this issue brief include:

- Cultural and Language Barriers
- Communicating Across Generations
- Social Barriers to Seeking Help
- Geographic Location
- Budget Constraints

### Cultural and Language Barriers

According to the [2011 American Community Survey Report](#), seven percent of Americans do not speak English. LIHEAPs may want to create materials in several languages, depending on foreign-language-speaking populations in the LIHEAP's constituency. Writing materials at lower reading levels while covering basic concepts can benefit those for whom English is a second language or who struggle with literacy in general.

The [Literacy Project Foundation](#) reports that many American adults experience poverty because of their low literacy levels. LIHEAPs should be aware of this when creating flyers, post cards, inserts, and summary pages on dedicated websites. All of these mediums lend themselves well to brief messages, bullet points, and images to facilitate understanding of the information. LIHEAPs with higher populations of low-income residents who speak little or no English may also benefit from hiring interpreters who are well-versed in other languages and cultures. One example comes from the State of Ohio, which contracts with a service called "Language Line." If a caller does not speak English, the caller is put on hold, and the agent contacts the service. Language Line immediately connects an interpreter to the call, which enables the ap-

plicant to interact with the LIHEAP office. Language Line can provide interpreters in all languages.

### Communicating Across Generations

Another factor that influences how to perform outreach is the age of the targeted audience. Research by communications and marketing experts has determined that the historical events, culture, and technologies a generation is raised with will often inform how that audience prefers to communicate.

For example, younger generations may prefer to receive emails and texts instead of traditional mail, and they may avoid face-to-face contact in lieu of learning about or applying for a program online. They may also prefer to receive information online or through social media. Earlier generations may prefer face-to-face communication as well as phone calls or traditional mail. They may be less inclined to use automated systems or websites to learn about or apply for LIHEAP.

To reach households with senior members, Wisconsin's LIHEAP targets their senior population through outreach efforts at senior sites, senior centers and public libraries, in addition to mailed information. Still, some seniors are resistant to seeking assistance, and they are the most difficult constituency to reach, according to Wisconsin LIHEAP. There have been several instances where older applicants have turned down assistance, indicating they preferred it go to someone who needed it more.

To combat this resistance, one agency in northern Wisconsin has an interesting approach, according to Jane Blank, a Wisconsin LIHEAP staffer. In addition to providing a one-time payment during the heating season, Wisconsin's LIHEAP offers an emergency heating system repair/replacement program. In order to market LIHEAP to certain senior populations, the agency encourages elderly applicants to think of the repair/replacement program as a sort of safety net program for their furnace should it break down. Qualifying for

the repair/replacement program also qualifies them to receive regular LIHEAP assistance.

Additionally, part of Wisconsin's LIHEAP is utility [rate-payer funded](#). The grantee has seen success in marketing its program as a way for applicants to get back a little of what they have paid into the fund through their electric utility's Public Benefit Fund (PBF) fee each month. Wisconsin LIHEAP found that senior customers were more willing to accept assistance from this fund if they were reminded that they had already been paying into the fund as customers of their utility companies.

### Social Barriers to Seeking Help

Wisconsin's example helps illustrate the concept that framing the message itself can be one of the most important, and perhaps difficult, parts of outreach. Just as culture, history and environment shape how different generations receive information, it also informs people's attitudes towards receiving aid and their willingness to seek it.

Several agencies and utility companies that presented at the 2016 NEUAC conference stated that the best method they had found was to "go to where the people are." New Jersey Natural Gas (NJNG) brings intake to the people by hosting "Energy Efficiency Days," an event prior to the start of New Jersey LIHEAP's heating component. The event provides application assistance and connects households with energy assistance and energy efficiency programs. The Energy Efficiency Days event is set up like a road show that lasts multiple days and is staffed by NJNG personnel.

Several other LIHEAP programs throughout the nation have worked with their local utilities and assistance programs to perform such assistance fairs. The benefit of these utility-sponsored programs, according to speakers at the 2016 NEUAC Conference, is that LIHEAPs can benefit from the utility company's marketing events.

In order to promote its energy fair, NJNG sends out

mailers to customers; includes inserts about energy assistance programs and the fair in final notices; partners with senior citizen centers and other community organizations; and promotes the fair on social media, in customer newsletters and fliers, and on its website. As a result, NJNG reported during its NEUAC presentation that attendance at the energy fairs has risen significantly between 2010 and 2015.

Schools are another safe space where LIHEAPs might engage customers. In Wisconsin, some local agencies have seen success by setting up booths at elementary and high school events where they conduct intake and promote the program. Targeting Head Start schools has also been successful, as they have similar low-income requirements to qualify. These efforts, along with handing out backpack fliers to students, have generated more awareness of LIHEAP.

Wisconsin's LIHEAP encourages and allows its local agencies to determine outreach activities to targeted communities. Results of their outreach efforts are reported each year in their "Program Operations and Community Service" (POCS) plans. In the POCS plans, agencies describe application intake and outreach sites, the methods used to notify the community of such sites and explain how they ensure that all demographics and vulnerable populations have access to LIHEAP.

### Geographic Location

The benefit of leaving outreach up to local agencies is that they are more familiar with their communities' needs. Outreach in rural areas differs greatly from outreach in more densely-populated cities. For the most part, rural outreach includes the more traditional methods of distributing print materials through the mail and at community events and county fairs. In bigger cities such as Milwaukee, traditional modes of communication have proven to be less effective. The Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the local LIHEAP sub-grantee, imple-

mented a different approach that has proven successful.

During the past year, Milwaukee County DHHS established new relationships with area non-profit organizations to analyze data to identify where it was and wasn't making itself known or available among customers. As a result, its intake methods changed to include hosting online applications on a new website and a service that allows residents to schedule an appointment online with their nearest intake center. It has even implemented a robo-texting program that sends a pre-generated text that reminds applicants of the time and date for their appointments. To advertise these changes, Milwaukee County DHHS contracted with a marketing company, which won awards for its LIHEAP-services campaign. The company created ads that were placed on the sides of buses, at bus stops, and five billboards throughout the city. The billboards' owner allowed the county to use the space at little to no cost.

"We are almost selling or marketing it [LIHEAP] as a business would," said Wisconsin LIHEAP's Jane Blank, "some financial constraints, of course, but it has proven to be very effective."

### Budget Constraints

If financial constraints are an issue, grantees still have outreach options. Again, as technology progresses, communication styles begin to change. The increase of computer and cellphone usage in recent generations has led to new platforms of community engagement that can be utilized for free advertising. Milwaukee County DHHS uses its [Facebook page](#), for example, to announce program events and host videos about the LIHEAP program in addition to other low-income services.

In 2015, HHS sponsored a webinar entitled, [Social Media 101](#), a primer on how to use social media to do outreach for LIHEAP. The audience was introduced to popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, along with offering professional advice on how to best maintain a social media presence. These platforms are readily available via smartphones, and the apps are free to download.

A speaker representing Atmos Energy at the 2016 NEU-AC conference, pointed to a photo from one of its events where a majority of the applicants standing in line were looking at their phones. Many of the applicants indicated that they had learned about the event through both advertising and social media.

### Summary

Outreach can take many shapes and forms. What may work for one LIHEAP grantee may not work for another. What may work in one area of a state may not work in a different area of that same state. Knowing the community and establishing a positive reputation within the community, is one of the key points to establishing a good rapport with potential applicants. Promoting outreach in neutral settings can help reduce social stigma.

Another key point is to create outreach and advertising in several different mediums and languages to reach the largest audience. Advertising through dedicated websites, mail inserts, flyers, brochures, news articles, energy assistance fairs, along with social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are examples of what has worked for some LIHEAPs.

Tracking outreach efforts can help LIHEAPs determine whether their activities have resulted in reaching the most vulnerable households or if those efforts need to be adjusted.

*This is Issue Brief has been prepared by the LIHEAP Clearinghouse under contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Energy Assistance. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, organizations or program activities imply endorsement by the U.S. Government or compliance with HHS regulations.*