LMI program enrollment improvements that make a difference

By Ben Nathan
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Enrolling in a utility program should be easy, quick, and stress-free for customers. But if that's true, why are over half of low- and moderate-income (LMI) customers aware of existing programs to improve energy affordability but unenrolled?

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It's not enough to make sure customers know of a program's existence. Improving strategies around customer eligibility, qualification, and verification is key to increasing enrollment in affordability programs, as well as making sure that the right customers are receiving the help they need in an equitable and effective manner.

There are many ways utilities can make impactful changes. Some strategies include:

- Enabling categorical eligibility
- Forming better data-sharing agreements between states and other stakeholders
- Simplifying enrollment requirements

At the E Source 2024 Low Income Energy Issues Forum Annual Meeting, utilities came together to share insights from their efforts to make process improvements and encourage enrollment in their respective programs. Here are a few noteworthy strategies that have been successful for Avista Utilities, Seattle City Light, and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP).

Take the process out of enrollment processes

The current challenge with program enrollment lies in making sure that customers who qualify for assistance based on income or other characteristics are actually enrolling in these beneficial programs.

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The reality is that an involved, complicated process to enroll in a program is sure to leave a bad taste in a customer's mouth. If the process feels like a waste of their time or requires information they can't easily access, most likely they'll stop enrolling altogether and move on with their day, leaving savings and other aid behind.

All of our participating panelists agreed that making the enrollment process as easy as possible is the way to better serve customers. A representative from Avista shared their utility's approach to autoenrollment, stating that doing so "reduces any barriers that are created when someone has to make an appointment."

Avista knows that something as seemingly small as an appointment can be a heavy burden. Some of the challenges that come with meeting that requirement can include:

- Making childcare arrangements
- Securing a translator
- Finding transportation
- Collecting the needed documents and forms to bring to the appointment

Instead, Avista cut out that arduous step with its autoenrollment program. Customers who benefit from programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, are automatically enrolled in other utility discount programs that would benefit them. It becomes a seamless, no-effort way customers can get support from Avista.

Another way to make a process seamless is to take advantage of data-sharing agreements. City Light spoke about how its partnership with Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) helps the utility be proactive with customer support. SHA regularly provides the utility with lists of its qualified residents and City Light autoenrolls everyone on those lists in applicable programs.

Remove the stigma and protect customers' dignity

Avista made one theme clear: break down barriers wherever possible to keep customers' dignity intact. For example, stop requiring appointments, simplify (or eliminate altogether) applications to greatly reduce stress or time, and provide resources in multiple languages.

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LADWP echoed that sentiment when its representative recognized how "people don't want to be seen as needing help." Utilities have the power to remove the stigma associated with LMI programs. LADWP did so with a program rebrand and launching self-attestation.

LADWP rebranded its discount program, including a name change. Changing the program from "Low

Income Discount Program” to “EZ-SAVE Program” avoids making anyone feel singled out, protecting their pride and dignity. The rebranding has made a big difference in how the program has been received.

With self-attestation, the customer isn’t required to provide proof of income which cuts the process time drastically because they can simply confirm the existing information is accurate. This takes the burden and responsibility off the customer. LADWP has seen a 40% increase in program enrollment since starting this simplified process.

For more highlights of what was covered in the 2024 Low Income Energy Issues Forum Annual Meeting, read our blog post Strategic perspectives on managing the affordability challenge.

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