LIHWAP Webinar Q & A

1. Is the 45% drawn down as of today or the first year?
    - **Answer:** As of April 11, 2023. We understand that many states have obligated funding to local agencies, which represents a legal commitment for funds. Local agencies then make payments on behalf of households and submit for reimbursement from the state. Therefore, drawdowns are one tool used to estimate the amount of LIHWAP funding that has been paid on behalf of eligible households, but it may be less than the actual amount that has been paid for household benefits.

2. Where can each state reach out to apply for this aid on behalf of individual households? Is it managed by smaller entities throughout our states?
    - **Answer:** Each state, except North Dakota which declined to participate in LIHWAP, received LIHWAP funds. States had the option to implement the entire program at the state level or to use local agencies, such as Community Action Agencies. Households can apply for assistance through the state or their local agency, depending on how your state decided to implement the program. We encourage households to visit waterhelp.info where they can enter their zip code to find out where to apply for services.

3. What if the utility provider will not allow clients to carry a credit?
    - **Answer:** In this case, an agency can ask the household to submit their water bill to them each month. The agency can make monthly payments to the utility provider until the household has exhausted the benefit amount they were approved for.

4. Monica, can you share your contact information?
    - **Answer:** MoSantana@capriverside.org

5. Can you share the link to the Data webinar?
    - **Answer:** https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/policy-guidance/lihwap-dcl-2023-13-data-matching-webinar-fy2023

6. As asked by others, can we open up the payment to pay all charges that appear on a water bill. In our municipalities, they have street lights, trash, etc. on the same bill and the company won't prevent disconnection if those charges are not paid. So clients have to pay the portion of non water charges or be disconnected in those scenarios.
    - **Answer:** OCS acknowledges that this is a challenged faced by utilities across the country. The authorizing language for LIHWAP specifically states that the funds can only be used for water and wastewater, so we cannot allow payments for any other portion of the bill. In cases where the water utility cannot separate payments to identify or credit only the portion designated for water, the grant recipient may work with the utility to identify the amount that is attributed to water based on average usage per person or other available information for water rates in the area. The utility must confirm that the full amount of the benefit payment was attributed to the correct account and that services will be maintained for a minimum of 30 days. In addition, grant recipients may leverage other available resources, such as the Community Services Block Grant, to address charges

unrelated to water and/or wastewater. Please see LIHWAP IM-2022-03 for specific guidance on the topic.

7. Similar to Carressa's question - I'm with a City government and our utility bills include multiple utilities in addition to water (sewer, stormwater, EMSA, refuse). Our ordinance and payment system are not currently set up to accept water-only payments. We're gathering an internal team to look into this - would love to get connected to cities or other utilities who have successfully set up their systems to accept LIHWAP.
    - **Answer:** We recommend reaching out to the state and/or local agency implementing LIHWAP where you are located to see if they can help connect you to other cities or utilities. They have built great partnerships with utilities through LIHWAP and likely know what changes some cities have had to make to accept payments

8. The Village of Gardner (water vendor) in Illinois has refused to accept funds on behalf of a customer. They want customers to accrue late fees as that is a source of revenue or Gardner. We have had this issue with other vendors on a small scale.
    - **Answer:** While many utilities have been eager to engage in LIHWAP, OCS recognizes that some have been hesitant to participate for various reasons. Providing information and continuing outreach has been useful to building relationships between LIHWAP administrators and local utilities. Expanding outreach to local water and utility associations and advocacy groups can be a way to engage utilities through channels that are familiar to them. The Office of Community Services has joined conversations with utilities to discuss roadblocks and encourage participation. Please contact the LIHWAP program specialist for your state if you are interested in further discussing joint conversations with OCS and your local utility.

9. We are having a hard time getting vendors on board to participate. Any suggestions to convince water companies that this a good thing to help customers?
    - **Answer:** OCS has several suggestions:
        - Utilize the Outreach Toolkit to share more information about the program.
        - Take the time to understand vendors' concerns about the program. We have heard that some hear the words "federal program" and immediately associate it with a lot more paperwork that they do not have time for. In most cases, vendors just need to get set up to receive payments from the state or local agency and establish a way of confirming with the state or local agency that payments are properly applied to customer accounts (such as through a monthly list or excel sheet).
        - Appeal to the vendors' bottom line. LIHWAP results in income to the vendor. These funds can reduce past due balances, increase cash flow, and improve customer service relations. There is no limit on far back a LIHWAP payment can cover. We have heard of payments across the country of $10,000+ that cover multiple years of arrearages.

10. What happens to the funds that go unallocated?

- **Answer:** Funds that remain unobligated at the end of the LIHWAP program period will be returned to the Department of Treasury. To support expenditure for LIHWAP funds, OCS has implemented a spend down strategy that includes intensive one on one training and technical assistance, a request for all grant recipients to forecast monthly expenditures using the LIHWAP Forecast form, and a process to reallot LIHWAP funding that grant recipients self-report will remain unobligated at the end of the currently authorized obligation period. Additional infromation about the LIHWAP Forecast and reallotment can be found in LIHWAP AT-2023-04 LIHWAP Forecast FY2023

11. Curious if all states have to enter into a memorandum of understanding with a water provider in order to provide payments? Our biggest challenge is getting water providers (especially 3rd party with mobile home parks) on board. We are missing a lot of people in mobile home parks.
    - **Answer:** While it is a best practice, states are not required to enter into an agreement with a water provider in order to provide payments. OCS released LIHWAP DCL-2022-21 with more information on how to make bill payments to water service providers without a written agreement. OCS recognizes that mobile home parks present a unique challenge and encourages agencies to have one-on-one conversations with these providers understand their exact situation and to find a solution.

12. Where do we go to make sure we are listed as a vendor?
    - **Answer:** Reach out to your state and/or local agency implementing the program. Visit our water service providers page for contact information.

13. Can you please expand more on allowing credit to a resident's account to support future payments?
    - **Answer:** For example, say a customer comes to you with a water bill that is $100. After looking at your benefit matrix, this household is eligible for $400 of assistance. You can pay the utility the full $400 on behalf of the household with the $300 over the amount of their current bill being remaining as a credit on their account for future bills.

14. If the vendor knows about customer disconnections can we apply for them or does the customer need to apply? The reason for this question is because we have some elderly/disabled customers that don't have internet nor a way to apply. What can we do?
    - **Answer:** The customer will need to apply themselves. There are several ways vendors can assist.
        - Provide a list of disconnected customers to your state or local agency implementing the program. The agency should have policies in place to ensure all households have a way to apply for assistance. Sections 2.8 and 2.9 of each state's implementation plan should detail these policies.
        - Print and mail the customer a copy of the LIHWAP application. Most agencies have a PDF of their LIHWAP application available online.
        - Ask your state or local agency where households can apply in person. If the customer is mobile, provide them with this information.

LIHWAP Webinar Q & A

15. There were many issues during the implementation stage which caused delays in the kick off of the program and identifying water vendors. Any recommendations on this if the funding is extended?
    - **Answer:** OCS recommends utilizing the Water Service Provider Outreach Toolkit to reach vendors. You can also partner with utility organizations, such as Public Utility Commissions, to conduct outreach.

16. Ryan: is there a member of Congress that is leading efforts to authorize LIHWAP as a permanent program?
    - **Answer**: We have received support from several state representatives who recognize the importance and impact of LIHWAP for low income households in their constituency. Please reach out to LIHWAP program specialist staff for questions regarding your specific congressional district.

17. Are we allowed to pay for septic systems to be pumped?
    - **Answer:** Yes. While LIHWAP funds may not be used for private well or septic payments to households, LIHWAP grant recipients may define wastewater treatment works to include septic services offered through contract as a service to a community of income-eligible households, provided that payments are made by the grant recipient directly to a vendor based on a LIHWAP vendor agreement for wastewater removal. For example, in some rural and tribal communities, the local government contracts with a local company to offer periodic septic wastewater removal to the community. In these circumstances, the grant recipient may define water treatment works to include that provider and use LIHWAP funds to reimburse for household services in lieu of a household payment. This information is provided in LIHWAP IM-2022-02.

18. Do we need to change the State Plan for any of these type of changes?
    - **Answer:** Changes to increase maximum benefits or include flexibilities require changes to the State Plan. This can be done by updating the applicable section and sending it to your LIHWAP program specialist. The turnaround for approval is just a couple of days.

19. Are there plans to increase the income limits or implement a sliding scale for those who earn slightly more?
    - **Answer:** The income limits for LIHWAP mirror LIHEAP and are included in the authorizing language for the program. The cap is 150% of FPG or 60% SMI. The exception is households that receive benefits through categorical eligibility. This means if they receive benefits from another program such as SNAP, TANF, SSI, or a means tested veteran's program, they are automatically eligible. They may exceed the income limits based on requirements for those programs due to the presence of vulnerable household members. More information about categorical eligibility can be found in LIHWAP IM-2021-04. They may exceed the limits based on requirements for those programs due to the presence of vulnerable household members.

LIHWAP Webinar Q & A

20. Where can see who is receiving this grant in order to help individual households within each state/ region?
    - **Answer:** LIHWAP is being administered in all states with the exception of North Dakota, as well as in DC, and five territories. There is a search feature on www.WaterHelp.info where you can enter a zip code and find local administrators.

21. When I search for that I can only find the connection for LEAP. All of the info under that only discuss heating but zero mention of water assistance available. The zip codes I am searching are: 81401 and 81416
    - I see what you mean – their website does not mention LIHWAP. In CO, households apply for LEAP and LIHWAP on the same application. If you click on the application, the water portion of the application begins on page 5. If this is your local agency, I recommend reaching out to them and requesting that they add information about LIHWAP to the LEAP page.

22. Will any modifications includes assistance homeowners will Wells who may not live within the city limits?
    - **Answer:** LIHWAP's authorizing language requires payments to go directly to the water or wastewater service provider on behalf of the household. We have instituted flexibilities that allow access for households with septic systems that need to have wastewater removed but there is not a method to provide benefits directly to households with wells.

23. Just to clarify "supplemental payments" - If we have assisted a client with a payment under the prior maximum, can we make a second payment? If the first payment didn't pay the entire past due amount, can we pay additional thru the supplemental? If they don't have a past due amount because we paid it, can we now provide a supplemental (second) payment for current bills?
    - **Answer:** Supplemental payments can be made to households that have already received a benefit payment for past due balances. OCS encourages LIHWAP administering agencies to pay the full amount of any past due balance to ensure connection to water services are maintained. Be sure to check with your state administrator to ensure state policies allow multiple benefit payments.

24. We are having problems with "included in rent" payments, as landlords are not cooperating. They do not want to accept the additional workload of tracking payments, etc., (have staffing issues) and they are refusing to provide water bill information. The clients are being left in the dust! Any consideration to being able to provide direct payments to clients with water/sewer included in rent?
    - **Answer:** LIHWAP's authorizing language requires payments to go directly to the water or wastewater service provider on behalf of the household. Payments are not allowed to be made directly to clients. LIHWAP IM-2021-05 provides more guidance on serving renter households.

25. I have 2 different questions (sorry) In Ms Clark's list of additional strategies is "rate reduction" How is that different from reducing the bill with a payment?
    - **Answer:** "Rate reduction" refers to a payment that is made on behalf of a household that is current on their bill, i.e. they do not have past due bills. This is the same as reducing a current bill. We know that some payments reduce a bill that covers more than one month's worth of charges. If a household has multiple months worth of bills, or an arrearage, this is considered a “prevention of disconnection” payment by OCS.

26. Will the federal language ever allow entities to pay full utility bills since Vendors will disconnect a client if we only pay the water and not the utility portion.
    - **Answer:** OCS acknowledges that this is a challenged faced by utilities across the country. The authorizing language for LIHWAP specifically states that the funds can only be used for water and wastewater, so we cannot allow payments for any other portion of the bill. Grant recipients may leverage other available resources, such as the Community Services Block Grant, to address charges unrelated to water and/or wastewater. Please see LIHWAP IM-2022-03 for specific guidance on the topic.

For TCA:

- Do you have an example of your Universal application? Would you share a copy of your intake form? – Answered; included here to prompt the sending of a PDF version of intake and application.
- New Orleans, question, how much of the old debt of water system was brought down with LIHWAP?