

# August 2020 Low-Income Energy Efficiency Workgroup

August 4, 2020 | Meeting Notes | Virtual meeting

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**Facilitators and Speakers:** Carrie Nelson (BPA), Steve Jole (Homes for Good), Sara Bowles (Tacoma Power), Jeff Feinberg (SnoPUD), Travis Hardy (Northern Wasco), Heather Moline (NWECC)

**Introduction:** Amy Burke, the new BPA Low Income Program Manager

## ***How are community action agencies and nonprofits responding to the increased need and restrictions on home visits?***

The states of Oregon and Washington both expressed they are struggling to spend DOE Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) funds and are unsure about the ability to spend next year. There is also some concern that if budgets were to be lowered, or if CAAs did not manage to spend out their budget, that it could result in lower funding in future years. One approach being considered in Washington is to target recently weatherized homes without DHPs and install them when it is safe to re-enter the homes.

There is some forgiveness with the extension of the fiscal year and allowing funds to be spent next year, but there is going to be a lot of work next year. The DOE released language that allowed states to use unspent funding from this year and add it to next year's budget. BPA is attempting to do the same. There is an open discussion about what concerns there are about how this will work next year if there are issues with spending out. Currently SnoPUD has a funding agreement with Snohomish County and the issue was to extend the term of the agreement and potentially modify the amount later.

Many agencies and contractors are limited in what they can do since there is no virtual option for many tasks such as tasks that require in-person testing of airflow to ensure client safety. Fortunately, at least in the state of OR, there is a waiver to skip the final inspection in order to pay contractors. Different states and contractors have provided guidance on safety protocols.

Some communities are more concerned about safety protocols than others, especially those in Phase 1 with more Covid cases. The state of WA released some guidance to agencies, including requiring an attestation that they would only bill for services while following COVID safety guidelines, though some variances are allowed with some guidance from the state.

Some safety tips: Tools should be cleaned (especially the blower doors) and the person inside the home should wear a Tyvek suit. LIHEAP Cares money pays for all the cost of PPE, extra time on site to do the work safely, and housing during the project and that language already existed prior to Covid, but is pretty buried. WA got permission from DOE to not require blower door tests due to COVID, though there may be guidance that it could improve air quality and safety in the home.

## ***How are utilities managing challenges?***

Tacoma Power started a remote inspection program in 2016, inspecting a limited set of measures at first but has expanded it to the more difficult measures including insulation, duct sealing, energy audits, and DIY projects. This is implemented via video (not recorded). Depending on what the technician and/or homeowner is comfortable with, they can use Facebook Messenger (no account needed), Facetime, Skype, and Zoom (can be used as an app on your mobile device as well). Tacoma's advice for using this for business is to make your name easily searchable on any platform so the person you are working with can easily find you. Cost savings come from using existing equipment and no travel expenses.

- Installs and inspections happen on the same day and contractors are seeing payments within 5 days of install, instead of 30 days. New contractors have signed on since Covid.
- If the technician or homeowner is having connectivity issues and cannot connect to the home's Wifi, they can send pictures for a remote inspection. They don't use this to monitor if the contractor is following the Covid protocol but they do highly encourage contractors to adopt the same process that Tacoma uses.
- They only do live videos but occasionally request a still photo of a model number. Signed waivers were initially required during the pilot but now they do a verbal check that the customer is comfortable being on video.

*Note: For more information about Tacoma's Remote Inspection Program, please find a presentation about this program in the "Meeting Materials Archive" on [BPA's Low Income Energy Efficiency webpage](#). All of the detailed speaker notes for the slides can be found in the PDF's comment bubbles.*

SnoPUD had to quickly mobilize and shift to digital communications once Covid hit and the biggest challenge was adjusting communication with contractors and helping them. Photos and video are OK with photos being sent to the utility. There is limited additional cost if they use equipment (i.e. smarty phones) that they already own. Like Tacoma, connectivity was an issue. They worked hard to prevent delays in getting work done and checking in with customers about their satisfaction. Contractors were told they can be inspected when home inspections are allowed again. Everyone has adapted impressively quickly and this new process will likely remain a part of the program going forward.

***What challenges are utilities and non-profits experiencing that you could use advice on?***

Effective and streamlined communication with contractors has been a challenge with fewer people in a centralized office starting back in March. One utility found that relying on voicemail to address questions and concerns from customers and contractors was causing significant delays. Forwarding calls to personal cell phones raised personal privacy issues since contractors got utility employee's personal information and would call after hours and on weekends. Personal cell phone voicemail would also be full with work related calls and the person would miss personal calls. The solution was to set up "twinning" the line to avoid the problem. This twins your desk phone with the cell phone so they ring at the same time but the voicemail goes to the desktop voicemail.

***What opportunities are there for increased partnership and what things can be done moving forward to help?***  
(Facilitated by Heather Moline at NWECC)

The WA Governor's order required a safety protocol for contractors. They need to first conform to the governor's guidance, then the department built additional weatherization requirements on top of the Governor's guidance to contractors. A separate state agency is responsible for checking.

Many utilities and CAPs are using this time to take additional trainings, incorporating process changes, considering how to streamline processes, and catch up on a backlog of work, but focusing on this is also wearing some people out. There was one suggestion of building a central hub for work to improve online data accessibility. One response to that idea was that using CARES money to do that may not be the highest priority right now.

Income qualification continues to be very time consuming and the dynamic to doing that during Covid in WA has a changing dynamic.

Currently, virtual inspections don't exist in the CAA network because it's not allowed by the DOE, and is also therefore not allowed by BPA for the Grant program.

***Wrap Up: The next meeting will be scheduled in the fall. Please look for some future communication on that.***

**Attendance:**

|                        |                  |                 |                |                  |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Adam Clardy O'Neil     | David Harris     | Jody Howe       | Michael Bowels | Sara Bowles      |
| Alex Zimmerman         | Dawn Senger      | Josh Warner     | Michael Coe    | Scott Mayfield   |
| Alicia Harmanson       | Deb Hayes        | Julie Doumbia   | Michelle Lopez | Sharon Carstens  |
| Amanda Rains           | Debbie Swanson   | Katie Pegan     | Mike Selig     | Shawn Collins    |
| Amy Burke              | Deborah DePetris | Kelly Haugh     | Nancy Philipp  | Sherrie Villmark |
| Andrea Chaney          | Denise Jerome    | Kevin Watier    | Olga Jimenez   | Steve Jole       |
| Anita Clever           | Don Zinger       | Kim Johnson     | Paul Hawkins   | Suzi Asmus       |
| August Burns           | Doug Case        | Koral Miller    | Pat Didion     | Tara Maynard     |
| Brian Dekiep           | Eric Miller      | Kurt Pugh       | Peter Kernan   | Thomas Elzinga   |
| Brian Jones            | Greg Huebner     | Lars Henrickson | Rachel DeRosia | Tim Lammers      |
| Brice Lang             | Haylee Dehning   | Lindsey Hobbs   | Randy Olsen    | Travis Hardy     |
| Carrie Nelson          | Heather Moline   | Liz Oberhausen  | Rick Hodges    | Vince Schueler   |
| Charity Spires         | Ian Jenrikson    | Margaret Lewis  | Rob Burr       | Wid Ritchie      |
| Charles Schifferdecker | Jason Bird       | Mark Ralston    | Robert Frost   |                  |
| Cheryl Paooli          | Jeff Feinberg    | Maureen Conley  | Rogelio Cortes |                  |
| Chris Robertson        | Jennifer Joly    | Megan Johannes  | Ryan Westman   |                  |
| Colleen Neel           | Jess Kincaid     | Mick Conley     | Salem Shankel  |                  |

**Go to the “Meeting Materials Archive” on [BPA’s Low Income Energy Efficiency webpage](#) to find this meeting’s agenda and discussion slides along with a presentation on Tacoma’s Remote Inspection Program. To see all of the detailed speaker notes for each of Tacoma Power’s Remote Inspection slides, click on the comment bubbles in the posted PDF.**