

BARRIERS TO ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:

Experiences with energy efficiency among New Haven, CT tenants

Energy Assistance programs should be easier to access.

Due to financial constraints, people we spoke to sought help with paying energy bills through the CT Energy Assistance program, Operation Fuel, utility financial hardship programs, and private organizations such as churches. While essential, people faced barriers in accessing these programs. Some people said that earning additional income or working extra hours sometimes pushed them above the income eligibility threshold, disqualifying them from receiving assistance even though they still struggled to afford their bills. One person said,

"I still don't know if I'm even going to qualify because essentially if I work what I'm scheduled to work in my job now, I will qualify. I don't make enough money. But if I work any overtime or if my pay stub happens to include a holiday that I get time and a half paid for that holiday, then I will make too much money... So I still have no idea if I'm going to actually get that assistance or not."

Another person explained how her daughter's income made her ineligible,

"But over here, I know for me, the problem is, is like [participant] was saying, my daughter just graduated from college. So it's the two of us here. I was eligible for energy assistance in the past, but because she just started getting her check, now I'm not eligible anymore. And now I never had a balance on my gas bill, now I have, I don't know, \$1,600 balance that I cannot... even if I work and she works, we just cannot keep up with it because so many of the things are going up like the food."

Another stated,

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“But the only thing is I live with my son and he works, so we have to go by his income. If his income goes up... I'm worried this year. I have my appointment later this month and I'm hoping that we can still qualify because I'm getting to that age where I'll be pulling in my social security. So, he's going to have to go and get his own place.”

Eligibility is only the first step to getting energy assistance. Many people said the application process could be confusing and frustrating. Gathering, printing and mailing pay stubs, bank statements, and housing leases was time and energy-consuming, and any missing information could be detrimental. When people expressed confusion they said they were met with disrespectful and unsympathetic program representatives. Some said they couldn't pay the amount they were asked to pay.

“I love it when they say, ‘How much can you afford?’ And I'm like, ‘\$50’, and they're like, ‘Ma'am, that's too low.’ Well, so why'd you ask?”

The extensive paperwork posed significant challenges for vulnerable populations, such as single mothers and the elderly, who have limited time and may struggle with online submission platforms. Additionally, the complications caused by the pandemic further exacerbated the situation, resulting in miscommunication, incorrect information, and incomplete paperwork. As a result, some applications were overlooked or rejected. One person said,

Energy Assistance is sometimes inadequate.

Participants said that energy assistance programs did not fully address the needs of low-income renters. Some people said the financial support provided was insufficient; they questioned the negligible impact of the matching program on reducing energy bills. The strict requirement of not missing any payments added pressure and anxiety for participants. One person said that she did not receive any financial assistance despite program approval.

“I just recently moved out of my condo and I did get assistance from, well, I applied for assistance with Community Action and was approved, allocated a certain amount of money, but never received it.”

People longed for methods to tackle the roots of the problems, instead of mere financial assistance as a band-aid. There was a call for more practical assistance, as one participant put it,

“I can give you the money to get whatever you need, but what good does that do if I'm allowing all the cold air to go out because I don't understand or know how to cover up my air conditioner, probably?”

Energy Assistance must be coupled with Energy Efficiency guidance and support.

People said that a combination of education and increased funding for these programs is crucial for reducing energy expenses and empowering residents to conserve energy. They said that education should focus on prevention, such as insulating homes effectively, and strategies to keep homes comfortable while minimizing energy usage. People recommended providing energy efficiency classes to educate renters and raise awareness about energy efficiency programs. Additionally, participants suggested promoting these programs by distributing flyers and airing TV commercials.

“Now is the time to really start teaching people about weatherization and possibly, learning how to do it on your own if you have a little, little, little nest egg of money where you can put into it or let's make it cheaper to do. Because it's so expensive just to buy the tools and equipment, just to get it done.”

They said that competing concerns such as rent, food and childcare meant that general awareness and low prioritization of energy efficiency was not prioritized.

Language impacts residents' understanding of and engagement with Energy Assistance programs.

Spanish-speaking participants faced multiple barriers in accessing both energy assistance and efficiency programs. Although bills and expense notifications were provided in Spanish, and translators were generally available when seeking assistance, people said more targeted outreach in their language regarding the availability of these programs was needed. One Spanish-speaking participant highlighted this issue:

“The issue is the message regarding the program... Imagine, you're left like... until later on, they tell you, 'This program was available. It was like this and this.' So, then you say, 'Oh, but if you would have explained it to me, maybe I would have applied, maybe I would have done something, but since I didn't know, I didn't understand...' Well, I wasn't able to do anything.”