



## Tips for Increasing LIHEAP Application Completion Rates

Many households who apply for LIHEAP, and qualify for assistance, may not receive the assistance they need because they often do not complete the application process. Although there are a variety of reasons why an applicant may not complete or abandon an application, there are some common reasons intake agencies may encounter.

Some of these reasons include: applicants are not properly prepared with required documentation when they apply for the first time, a misunderstanding of or lack of knowledge of what constitutes an eligible household, technical difficulties that applicants face when attempting to submit their documents electronically, and privacy concerns when submitting documentation. The most common reason applications abandon their LIHEAP applications is that the applicant does not submit the required documents prior to their first appointment.

This brief will highlight some of the most common challenges to application completion as well as highlight common solution strategies used by LIHEAP grantees.

### Preparing the Applicant for the Application Process – Establishing Eligibility

The chances of achieving complete applications are much higher if the applicants are well-prepared with the required documents they need to submit. According to some LIHEAP Grantees<sup>1</sup>, if applicants have to return for a second application attempt, they will likely abandon their application.

It is important the applicant be well-informed on what they need to bring to the appointment prior to the first time they apply. One missing document can result in a need for a second appointment. If the applicant knows exactly what they need prior to their initial application process, and is well-prepared, they have a much higher likelihood of completing their application. The examples in this issue brief will highlight some of the approaches that other grantees are taking to address issues in LIHEAP application completion rates.

### Nevada

When an incomplete application is received in Nevada, the state sends the applicant a request for the required documentation and gives ten days to submit that information. The state encourages case managers to obtain the required verification documents through alternative methods, such as obtaining it from another program or making a phone call directly to the applicant's landlord.

Approximately 21% of Nevada LIHEAP applications were denied in FY 2019 due to incomplete applications. These denials are mostly due to a failure by the applicant to respond to the request for additional information. Denial reasons in Nevada are reported to be because the verification documentation is not submitted when it is requested by the agency. Nevada is currently working towards restructuring the organization and methods of their operations to a greater utilization of computers and new technologies to increase program efficiencies in the future<sup>ii</sup>.

## Maine

Maine, which has an application abandonment rate of 7.9% in FY 2019, has undertaken an application improvement process that aims at simplifying the application process and implementing measures to help ensure applicants bring all information and documentation needed to complete a full application at the initial intake [appointment](#). Maine is also working with sub-grantees to ensure the right questions are asked to ensure the applicant know exactly what they need to bring in order to complete the application. This approach is proactive in that the intake workers seek to reduce barriers and incomplete documentation prior to the initial application.

## Florida

Some states, such as Florida, may experience vastly different application abandon rates among regions, but share a common factor in the cause of those incompletions. Seven Florida counties reported application abandonment rates ranging from 0% to 30% for FY 2018. However, all of these Florida regions report the same factor as causing those rates—applicants do not have the required

documentation. One promising solution identified by regional intake sites is to fully prepare the applicant for the appointment by educating them regarding what documents they need to provide to verify and establish their eligibility.

In Tallahassee's service area for example, applicants (prior to their initial appointment) are given a [checklist](#) and verbally informed of what documents they need to provide. The Tallahassee agency also provides a courtesy appointment the following day to prevent the applicant from calling the appointment line again. They are given 24 hours to return with the required documentation.

Sarasota County, Florida agency provides outreach to low-income apartment complexes where vulnerable populations live, by providing the service at their place of residence<sup>iii</sup>. This strategy is effective because it allows for the information to be readily available for the applicant—being they are at their place of residence<sup>iv</sup>. The Sarasota County agency even provides a computer and printer to assist the applicants in gathering and submitting their documentation.

In the Lecanto, Florida service area, applicants receive mailed-in information as well as home visits. The Lecanto service area agency mails the applicant information so they know that if the required documents are not submitted, the assistance can and will likely be delayed if the application is not completed in its entirety.

## Tennessee

According to the LIHEAP office<sup>v</sup>, applicants in Tennessee tend to not finish their applications mainly due to their inability to obtain income information from past employers, missing declaration of zero-

income, expired identification cards and not being able to provide Social Security cards or pay stubs.

The LIHEAP administrator in Tennessee identified the most effective strategy in addressing these causes of incomplete applications to be following up with the applicant via telephone call to see if they would like to re-apply or if they need further assistance with collecting missing and required documentation. Some Tennessee agencies even allow applicants to text pictures of information to the agency and use the agencies printers to print of required documents using a secure information sharing platform, which is often user and password protected. Transmitting personal information over the internet or using technology, should be carefully developed with security and privacy in mind. In-home visits are provided for homebound applicants and the agency staff physically highlights important information on materials for the elderly, homebound and those who have difficulties with reading.

### Grantee Discretion and Policy Changes - Social Security Numbers

Many households who abandon their applications may do so when they are required to submit Social Security Numbers for not just the applicant, but all members of the household. If the household has what they believe are “ineligible members” living in the home, they may not have social security numbers to provide. In this case, receiving assistance as a result of failing to disclose ineligible household members would be categorized as fraud, waste or abuse<sup>vi</sup>.

As outlined in the Privacy Act of 1974, and applied to the LIHEAP Program, grantees are prohibited from “mandatory requirements of applicants

submitting Social Security Numbers from LIHEAP applicants and denying them assistance if they refuse to provide them<sup>vii</sup>”. Statutory changes in the Privacy Act now authorizes LIHEAP grantees to either require or not require Social Security Numbers from not just the applicant, but all household members.

Due to this statutory change in the Privacy Act in 2010, grantees have discretionary authority to require Social Security Numbers in the process of administering their LIHEAP programs<sup>viii</sup>.

### Eligible Households – Understanding Eligibility Requirements

It may help an applicant not only decide to apply, but finish their application, if the grantee educates the applicant during intake of the exact eligibility requirements and definitions provided by the Office of Community Services of what defines an “eligible household” to receive LIHEAP services. Educating applicants on the terminology of eligible household members—and what is not categorized as ineligible applicants—may have a positive impact on the number of applicants completing their applications.

As defined in section 431 of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996<sup>ix</sup> (PRWORA), commonly known as the [welfare reform law, “qualifying aliens,” are eligible for LIHEAP assistance](#)<sup>x</sup>. It would be important for a household to learn this knowledge.

The Act covers legal permanent residents, refugees, asylees, individuals paroled into the U.S. for a period of at least 1 year, individuals whose deportation has been withheld, individuals granted conditional entry, and certain individuals who are victims of domestic abuse. Qualified aliens are

eligible to receive assistance and services under the LIHEAP program so long as they meet other LIHEAP requirements<sup>xi</sup>.

It may help increase application rates if a grantee provides clear and concise educational materials through outreach materials that are appropriate to their agency that clearly explains what constitutes eligible households. Making these guidelines clear to an applicant will potentially assist in helping decrease concerns that typically lead to application abandonment.

### Technical Difficulties in the Documentation Submission Process

Some applicants may simply do not know how to submit their documents—especially if the agency utilizes an online application system. In some households that have vulnerable members, especially elderly members, understanding new technologies could be of concern. It may be that they do not know they can take a photo of their documents from their phone and send them to the agency—if that is the case for an agency, and this could possibly result in an application being abandoned. Low-income households may not have access to fax machines, scanners or traditional desktop and laptop computers<sup>xii</sup>.

The United States Census Bureau released a report<sup>xiii</sup>, [Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016](#), that reveals only 21% of households with an income below \$25,000 a year had a reliable internet connection. The report also shows that low-income households are more likely to exclusively use a smartphone and do not have a traditional desktop or laptop computer—which means the smartphone is the exclusive medium used in the application process. This usage of

smartphones as opposed to desktops or laptops can increase the chances of complicated document submission, as smartphones do not have traditional scanning or faxing capabilities that members of vulnerable populations might not be familiar with.

Applicants may not understand that submitting documents through online application portals is secure; the agency may want to consider designing outreach materials to help applicants understand the privacy and security of their information.

### Summary

If all households who applied for LIHEAP followed through with the completion of their application, many more households would receive the LIHEAP assistance for which they qualify. Input from LIHEAP grantees<sup>xiv</sup> show that the most common and useful strategy to increase application rates. The grantees highlighted in this issue brief found the following methods useful for increasing application rates; however, there are many ways in which a program can improve application completion:

- Mail a request for information and give adequate time for applicants to submit that information.
- Obtain applicants information from another program, if possible.
- Make applicants aware of the program's regular and crisis application processing timeframes.
- Verbally discuss document requirements with applicants.

- Provide a checklist of required documents prior to the intake appointment.
  - Conduct on-site visits at applicants place of residence.
  - Allow applicants to text information to the agency (low-income households are more likely to exclusively use smartphones as opposed to desktop computers).
  - Provide printing and scanning services for applicants.
  - Physically highlight important information on outreach materials for households with vulnerable populations.
- Consider including “incomplete denial” in the list of grounds for fair administrative hearing.
  - Streamline application form and required documentation.
  - Train intake staff to ask questions relevant to required documentation.<sup>xv</sup>
- Implementing some or some combination of these strategies will likely enhance the chances of achieving an increase in application rates and diminish the number of abandoned and incomplete applications. These methods allows the applicants to understand what is required of them before and when they apply, increasing their chances of completing a LIHEAP application.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> M. Worten-Meshberger, D. Straughter, B. Worthington, T. Fullmer, M. Azhar, K. Coffman, M. Violette, personal communication, July-August, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> M. Wortman-Meshberger, personal communication, July-August, 2019.

<sup>iii</sup> M. Violette, personal communication, July-August, 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Violette, personal communication, July-August, 2019.

<sup>v</sup> B. Worthington, personal communication, July, 2019.

<sup>vi</sup> United States Government Accountability Office. Report to Congressional Requesters. Low-Income Home energy Assistance Program. Greater Fraud Prevention Controls are Needed. p. 13.

<sup>vii</sup> Office of Community Services. LIHEAP Q & As for Professionals. LIHEAP Household Income. Section 1. 2019. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/resource/professional-frequently-asked-questions>

<sup>viii</sup> Office of Community Services. LIHEAP Q & As for Professionals. LIHEAP Household Income. Section 1. 2019. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/resource/professional-frequently-asked-questions>

<sup>ix</sup> Authenticated U.S. Government Information. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. 42 USC 1305 note. <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ193/PLAW-104publ193.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Personal and Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. 1996 <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/personal-responsibility-and-work-opportunity-reconciliation-act-1996>

<sup>xi</sup> Office of Community Services. LIHEAP Q & As for Professionals. 2019. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/resource/professional-frequently-asked-questions>

<sup>xii</sup> American Community Survey Reports. Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016. R. Camille. 2018

<sup>xiii</sup> American Community Survey Reports. Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016. R. Camille. 2018.

<sup>xiv</sup> M. Worten-Meshberger, D. Straughter, B. Worthington, T. Fullmer, M. Azhar, K. Coffman, M. Violette, personal communication, July-August, 2019.

<sup>xv</sup> M. Worten-Meshberger, D. Straughter, B. Worthington, T. Fullmer, M. Azhar, K. Coffman, M. Violette, personal communication, July-August, 2019.