

Austin Energy Low Income Consumer Advocates
Resolution 20131107-052 Meeting #1
January 15, 2014

Attendees:

Kathy Stark (Austin Tenants' Council), Mark Widoff (Gray Panthers), Gloria Cueva (Caritas), Michelle Akers (HACA), Angel Ramirez (VFW), Ruby Roa (COC), Kathleen Hopkins (ABC), Vanessa Sarria (CAN), Randy Chapman (TLSC), Barbara Grove (Austin Interfaith), Carol Biedrzycki (Texas ROSE), Bob Batlan (Austin Interfaith), Linda Perez (MOWAM), Tonda Owens (Travis County), Pat Macy (St. Austin), Lanetta Cooper (TLSC), Barbara Rush (Morrison), Shannon Halley (Tovo), Kerry Overton (AE), J.J. Gutierrez (AE), Ronnie Mendoza (AE), Robena Jackson (Facilitator), Elaine Kelly-Diaz (AE), Lisa Tamez (AE), Melissa Davis (AE), Lori Kirchgatter (AE), Sandra Castillo (AE), Jessica Twining (AE), Irene Nemitsas (AE)

- Welcome/Opening Remarks
 - Kerry Overton, Deputy General Manager, Austin Energy, welcomed all attendees and introduced Robena Jackson, meeting facilitator
 - Mr. Overton reviewed Resolution 20131107-052 and stated that the group has been ordered to develop a comprehensive program to address the resolution
 - Ms. Jackson verified all groups represented:
 - Austin Interfaith, Texas Rose, Meals on Wheels and More, Travis County, St. Austin Catholic Church, Texas Legal Services, Austin Tenants Council, Caritas, Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Ladies of Charity, Any Baby Can, Community Advancement Network (CAN), Gray Panthers
 - Question raised: Ms. Biedrzycki inquired about Resolution 20131212-081 – concerning administrative hearing process and customer information communication procedures
 - Ms. Jackson responded for purposes of these meetings attendees are to concentrate on discussing/providing recommendations for resolution 20131107-52
 - Resolution 20131212-081 was put on hold/parking lot for group to review at the close of the meeting
 - Ms. Jackson reviewed her role as facilitator:
 - Acts as neutral moderator
 - Not content expert
 - Helps move meetings forward and stay on task
 - Ensure lines of communication remain open
 - Ms. Jackson established ground rules for meetings:
 - Listen
 - Speak one at a time
 - Stay concise and to the point
 - Any items that may be out of scope will be tabled/put on the parking lot
 - Stay focused at task on hand
 - Silence phones
 - All attendees agreed to rules
- Meeting Structure
 - Ms. Jackson proposed meeting structure moving forward, Recommending establishment of two groups: Stakeholders and Working Group
 - Stakeholders
 - Will meet along with Working Group 2 or 3 times during total 5 meeting process, though they can choose to come to all 5 meetings if they like. Currently, input from any individual stakeholders not represented on the

Working Group will be taken at meetings #1 (to get all views on the table) and #4 (before the Working Group finalizes recommendations)

- Will serve as a resource and receive all information dispersed to group, and may provide input to Working Group members through email and other contact, but will not be involved in the month-to-month deliberations and decision-making of the Working Group
- Working Group
 - Approximately 19-21 people
 - Consists of:
 - Discount Steering Committee members
 - Austin Energy representative
 - One representative from each nonprofit community advocacy organization and up to three members at large representing community advocates/representatives not currently affiliated with a nonprofit organization (examples include neighborhood associations, other community groups)
 - Representative from each organization, including Austin Energy, may designate one alternate to represent them in the event of their absence, with a roster being created for communication purposes
 - Working group will develop final recommendations for City Council
- Question raised: Ms. Sarria asked about clarifying decision-making process
 - Ms. Jackson stated that throughout the process, Working Group members would discuss options and recommendations, and she would capture areas of group agreement at each meeting around each topic. At the final meeting, Working Group members should agree that the recommendations represent the collective views of the group. Those recommendations will be submitted to City Council.
- All attendees agreed to proposed meeting structure, and each organization's representative and alternate were chosen
- Best Ideas
 - Resolution contains three main priorities that need to be addressed:
 - Develop revised rules for deferred payment plans
 - Develop an arrearage management plan
 - Develop appropriate customer services practices for providing information
 - Ms. Halley informed the group that she had a link that provided information regarding Houston's arrearage program
 - Mr. Chapman spoke of initial information presented to City Council prior to ordinance decision
 - It is available as a link online
 - Members felt this information would be helpful to see/review
 - Before moving straight to process, it was agreed that a better understanding of Austin Energy's current policies, nationwide best practices (for arrearage) would be helpful in order to understand goals/objectives of meetings (see action items)
 - Question raised by Mr. Widoff requesting more info about Austin Energy's current policies on disconnects, deferred payment plans, violations (what triggers them), severance process, etc. (see action items)
 - Mr. Batlan mentioned it is important to remember there are three major parties involved in process of creating an effective arrearage management plan: Customer Advocacy Group, Austin Energy, and the customer
 - Questions raised by Ms. Halley and Ms. Perez as to why current deferred plans are not working – is the debt too high? Installments too large? Does Austin Energy capture this information?

- Ms. Biedrzycki stated she had submitted a request to AE to receive in writing how AE defines a broken payment arrangement, how a customer is defined to be in good standing, and how AE defines default.
- Question was raised by Mr. Chapman as to whether or not Austin Energy has policies for those attempting to secure public housing but are being turned down due to old debt
 - Is there a policy to deal with debt due to special circumstances (domestic violence, sudden illness, etc.)
 - Ms. Akers responded that on public housing front HACA is aware of the situation and working on a remedy
 - A few members stated issue also present with those trying to secure private housing
- Ms. Jackson recommended that the group dedicate time during the next meeting to review background information from Austin Energy and that the group work an additional hour
 - Group consensus was that Austin Energy would submit background information prior to the next meeting
- Ms. Jackson stated that
 - Austin Energy would provide both the working and stakeholder group with background information prior to the next meeting
 - Austin Energy would provide a presentation during the beginning of the next meeting to review the information submitted (
 - Group consensus for the next meeting time would be 9:30am to 12:30pm
 - Stakeholders may choose to attend all meetings and will receive all information from each meeting (i.e. minutes, handouts, etc.)
- Ms. Rush recommended that Austin Energy create a static page available to both working and stakeholder group to house and review agendas, minutes, handouts, etc.
- Ms. Roa made statement regarding training of Austin Energy customer service representatives
 - Need to improve performance, be more familiar with current AE payment plan policies, and be more understanding of those in need
- Ms. Akers (HACA) briefly discussed Best Single Source Plus (BSS+) – a city and county-funded program for those who need rental and utility assistance
 - Ms. Biedrzycki stated that agencies who have access to the BSS+ program should send representatives to the group meetings
- Ms. Biedrzycki requested more information on a previous Austin Energy “Low Income Pilot Project” initiated with Caritas (see action items)
- Ms. Roa requested copies of any memos concerning any Austin Energy policy changes during the past two years, such as termination of \$55 same day service option/fee.
- Mr. Batlan requested if Austin Energy had any data on other nationwide arrearage programs or model programs (see action items)
- Ms. Hopburn recommended that the groups utilized Austin Energy as service experts when conducting research
- Upcoming Meetings
 - Ms. Jackson proposed increasing the meeting time from 1.5 hours
 - All members agreed to new time of 9:30a – 12:30p
 - Foundational information to be sent to members prior to meeting #2 so they have a chance to review
 - Ms. Jackson set general agenda for remaining meetings:
 - #2 – foundational overview, discussion begins on deferred payment plans
 - #3 – deferred payment plans end, arrearage plan discussion begins (Ms. Biedrzycki to discuss data she compiled pertaining to model programs)
 - #4 – arrearage ends, customer information/promotion discussion begins
 - #5 – finalize customer information/promotion, complete final recommendations

- Ms. Jackson recommends that the working group balance their time between discussing the issue and taking action (i.e., making recommendations)
- Ms. Biedrzycki inquired back to Resolution 20131212-081, specifically concerns relating to 6-mo timeline of completion for arrearage management plan, specifically:
 - “WHEREAS, Resolution 20131107-052 directed the city manager to work with the Discount Steering Committee to develop an arrearage management plan and to solicit the recommendations of the Electric Utility Commission, Resource Management Commission and the Water and Wastewater Commission and to report to council within six months” (source: www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=202972)
 - Ms. Jackson responded that, at the current time, the objective of these meetings is to discuss/recommend to City Council next steps referring to Resolution 20131107-052 only – attendees were in agreement to concentrate on this resolution
- Mr. Overton asked for clarification on the expectation of Austin Energy researching arrearage programs from across the country
 - Ms. Sarria asked Ms. Halley to provide information/link regarding Houston’s arrearage program
 - Ms. Jackson provided her email address for group communication purposes
- Action Items:
 - Austin Energy and/or Ms. Halley to provide link to members of City Council meeting including initial information/data received prior to ordinance decision
 - Austin Energy to provide current policies regarding deferred payment plans, disconnects, collections/severance process, etc.
 - Austin Energy to provide in writing what defines a broken payment arrangement, a customer in good standing, and defaulting on payment.
 - Austin Energy to research into creating a static webpage for information/materials
 - Austin Energy to provide information on “Low Income Pilot Project”
 - Austin Energy to provide information on other utility arrearage programs
 - Ms. Biedrzycki and Mr. Batlan to provide data/information on arrearage model programs