

Cooper
4/6

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

Recommend an Office of Ombudsman

Recommendation: An Office of Ombudsman should be created to address utility billing and service problems for residential customers of Austin Energy and the City of Austin's Water/Wastewater utilities.

Targeted Group: All residential City of Austin electric and water/wastewater utility customers with particular emphasis on low and low- moderate income customers.

Time Schedule: Establish office in FY 2016 and begin providing services in FY 2017

Program Description: An Office of Ombudsman would be created to work under the City Auditor and be housed at the same site where Austin Energy employees are on site to assist customers. The Ombudsman would be chosen by the Council by contract and funded out of Austin Energy and COA Water/Wastewater budgets. The office would be funded in an amount sufficient to allow an Ombudsman's presence at all utility customer service centers and at community centers; to provide for a periodic newsletter; to participate with customers in mediation with the utilities on billing and service issues; to work with customers on utility-related issues. Priority of service would be for the Ombudsman to focus on low and moderate income neighborhoods with a goal of reducing utility bills through:

- Resolution of billing disputes;
- Customer enlistment in energy efficiency and water conservation programs; and
- Accessing public and private resources for bill payment assistance and for implementation of actions to achieve energy efficiency and water conservation savings.

The Ombudsman would make an annual report to the Council describing its activities over the previous FY, including data analysis, and provide recommendations, if any, to improve customer utility service. The report would be available to the public.

Need for Program: The LICATF has heard months of complaints from utility customers, consumer advocates, and affordable housing advocates concerning the lack of success they or their clients have had in dealing with the utility on billing and service issues. An independent Ombudsman would provide customers, particularly low and moderate income customers with a resource to help them resolve disputes and obtain energy efficiency and conservation services.