Ontario Energy Board

Commission de l'énergie de l'Ontario

LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance – Training Webcast: Social Service Agencies

November 25 & 26, 2010

Agenda

- Program Manual
- Program Overview
- Utility – Social Agency Partnerships
- Agency Roles & Responsibilities
- Eligibility Criteria & Grant Amounts
- Customer Care Tools
- Application Process
- Standard Forms
- Reporting
- Questions

2011 LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance Program Manual

- What is it?
  - The Program Manual provides the framework for the administration of the LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance Program.
  - It provides the information that guides the working relationship between utilities and the agency partners.
- How should it be used by agencies?
  - Provides a standard process for agencies to follow in screening applicants.
  - Informs agencies of the different customer service tools available from electricity utilities and how they can benefit customers.
  - Contains the standard forms for processing applications.
  - Screening guidelines to guide discretionary decisions.

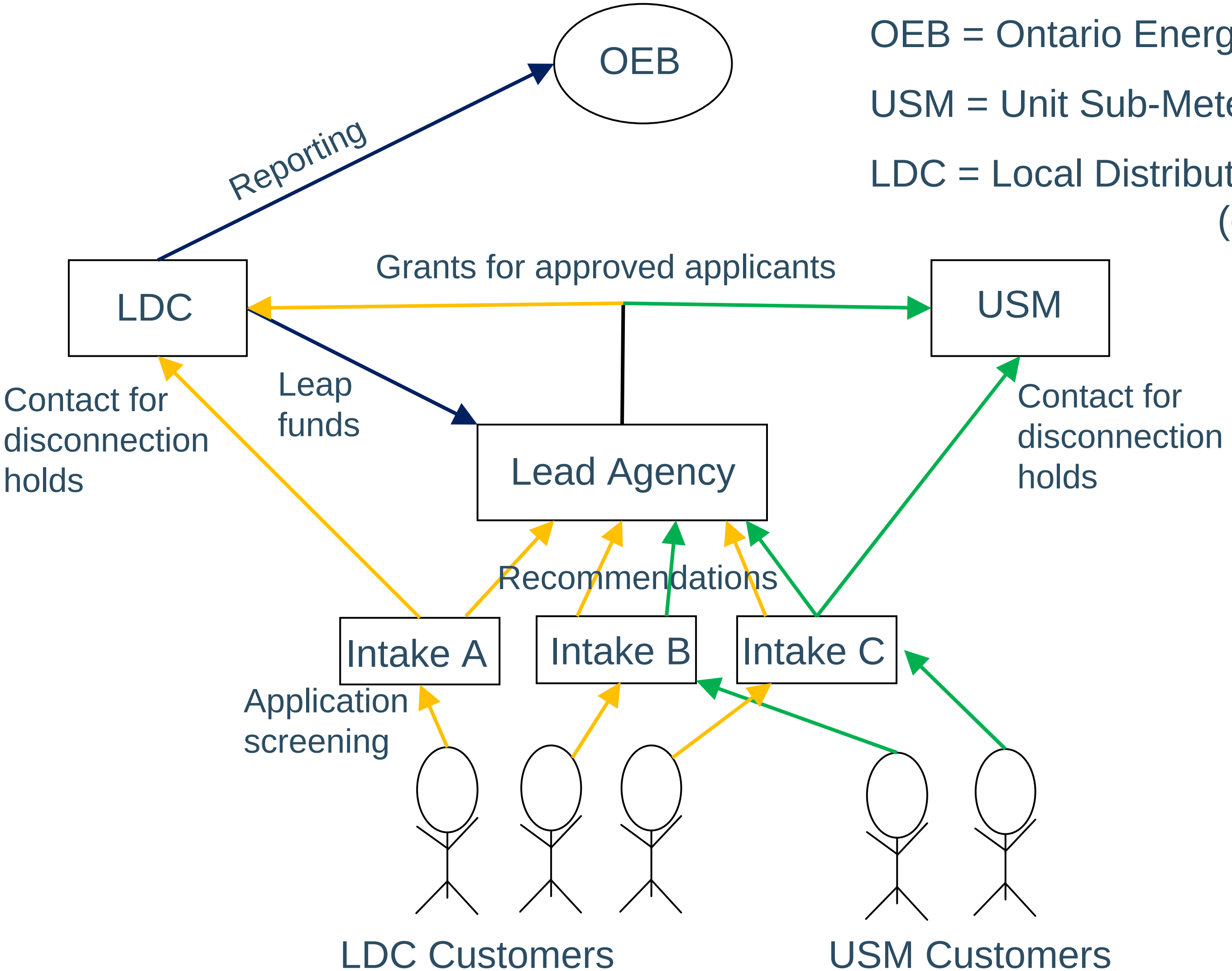
Program Overview

- LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance is a province-wide, rate-payer funded emergency financial assistance program for eligible low-income customers.
  - For 2011, available to eligible customers of electricity distributors and unit sub-metering providers. Gas distributors to continue Winter Warmth.
- LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance is designed to provide emergency assistance to customers struggling to pay their bills, and *not ongoing* bill assistance.
- Funds from each distributor are available only to eligible customers of that distributor, and customers of unit sub-metering providers within the distributor's service area (i.e. funds are <u>not</u> pooled provincially).

Program Overview

- LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance based on the Winter Warmth program.
- Each utility is required to provide, each year, the greater of 0.12% of total distribution revenue or $2,000.
  - Ranges from approx. $2,000 to $1m, depending on size of utility.
- Program relies on partnership between utilities and social service agencies.
- For approved applicants, funds remitted directly to the utility or unit sub-metering provider and credited to the applicant’s account. Funds are never provided directly to customers.
- Unused funds are rolled over to the following year.

Program Overview



OEB = Ontario Energy Board

USM = Unit Sub-Metering Provider

LDC = Local Distribution Company (or Utility)

Utility – Social Service Agency Partnerships

- Each utility must partner with at least one social service agency.
  - many utilities will have a Lead agency and one or more Intake agencies, in order to ensure easier access by customers.
- Partnerships should follow framework outlined in the Program Manual.
  - Some elements left to negotiation between utilities and their agency partners.
- Timing & form of payments made by utilities to social service agencies to be agreed upon between partners.
  - i.e. lump sum in January or spread out over several smaller payments.

Utility – Social Service Agency Partnerships

- Program admin/delivery fees are limited to 15% of the LEAP funds contributed by utilities:
  - Division of 15% between Intake and Lead agencies to be negotiated between agencies depending on local needs.
  - Funds are rolled over from previous year are not included in the calculating 15%.
  - 15% calculated on funds provided by utility, and not funds distributed on behalf of applicants.

Roles & Responsibilities – Lead Agencies

- Managing utility funds (receiving, tracking, remitting payment)
- Providing utility partner(s) with an updated list of the Intake Agencies for the purposes of referrals by utility call centre staff.
- Tracking and reporting to service providers according to requirements in Appendix C.
- Management of customer files, including negotiating the location of storage and process for transferring files with Intake Agencies.
- Performing Intake roles where there is not Intake agency.
- Making final decisions on applications based on recommendations from Intake agencies.

Roles & Responsibilities – Intake Agencies

- Screening & processing applicants & making recommendations to lead agency.
- Verification and storage of documentation.
- Assisting Lead agencies with reporting.
- Communicating with service providers (obtaining disconnection holds, verifying account information and payment history, etc.)
- Providing appropriate referrals and follow-up support to applicants.

Eligibility & Screening Criteria

- Applicants must meet the following criteria:

1. Are an existing customer of the utility providing the funding, or are an existing customer of a unit sub-metering provider operating within the service area of the utility;
2. Reside at the address for which there are arrears; and
3. Have a pre-tax household income at or below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-off (LICO) + 15%, taking into account family size and community size. *(see table on page 21 of the Manual)*

Eligibility & Screening Criteria

- In screening applicants, agencies to consider the following:
  - Receipt of financial assistance should allow the applicant to maintain or reconnect energy service, in order to promote sustainability of the customer's connection.
  - The applicant has demonstrated a prior attempt to the pay the bill. The service provider, as appropriate, can be contacted for information about the applicant's payment history, if necessary.
  - The applicant is in the threat of disconnection or has been disconnected. Agencies should focus on *emergency* assistance, but will need to balance this with early intervention.
  - Funding should be accessed only once per year per fuel, up to the financial cap.

Grant Level

- Maximum grant is $500 per fuel per household per year.
  - Agencies may use their discretion to offer up to $600 to applicants that live in electrically heated homes.
  - If applicant owes less than maximum, the grant cannot exceed amounts owed.
  - If applicant owes more than the maximum, a maximum grant may be provided, as long as the applicant will be able to sustain their energy service following the grant. Rationale must be documented.

Customer Care Tools

- Some customer care tools may provide particular benefit to low-income households:
  - **Equal Payment Plan -** Spreads the cost of electricity over the course of a year to reduce the volatility of bills month to month.
  - **Arrears Payment Agreement -** Can help a customer bring his/her account into good standing by spreading the cost of arrears over several months.
  - **Third Party Notice -** Allows customers to designate a third party to receive notice of disconnection. Helpful for customers that might need assistance with monitoring bill payment obligations.
  - **Suspension of Disconnection (or Disconnection Hold) -** Allows customers additional time to complete the application process for financial assistance without having service disconnected.
- Agencies should contact their local utility for more information.

Application Process

Step #1: Pre-screening

- Applicants pre-screened over the phone. Five questions asked to assess eligibility.
- If applicant is deemed ineligible for LEAP, they should be informed about and provided with information on other resources.
- Applicant should also be informed that they may qualify for conservation programs.

Step #2: Scheduling Interview Appointments

- If applicant may be eligible, caseworker should book appointment and record the date, client's name, address, service provide and account number.
- Inform applicant that they are required to bring documentation outlined in Manual.
- Interviews may be conducted over the phone if:
  - Travel required to in-person interview would cause hardship to the customer (at agency's discretion).
  - Applicant has mobility or travel difficulties due to age, disability, illness or injury.
- Agency should inform applicant that all required documentation and signatures will still need to be provided (via fax or e-mail) which may delay the process.

Application Process

Step #3: Application Interview

- During interview, caseworker must:
  1. Obtain consent from applicant (Consent to Disclosure of Personal Information Form);
  2. Verify all required documentation; and
  3. Complete the LEAP application form (Appendix F).
- A copy of all documentation should be kept by caseworker.
- Caseworker should assess applicant's other needs (such as financial counselling) and provide appropriate referrals.
- Caseworker should inform applicant that application cannot be assessed without consent.

Step #4: Verifying with the Service Provider

- Caseworker will contact designated service provider contact person to verify applicant's account information and payment history.
- Without signed consent form, service providers will be unable to verify information.
- If necessary, caseworker can request a disconnection hold while application assessment is taking place.
- Electricity distributors are required to provide a disconnection hold of 21 days when informed by a social agency that a customer is being assessed for financial assistance.
  - OEB currently working to develop similar rules for gas distributors and unit sub-metering providers, but these are not yet in place.

Disconnection Hold Timeline for Electricity Utilities

Disconnection Notice Received	Disconnection Suspended or Disconnection	Disconnection Period	
<= 10 days	**<= 21 days**	**<= 11 days**	
Time for customer to resolve account or have agency inform utility that evaluation underway for financial assistance.	When informed by agency, utility must suspend disconnection for 21 days. Customer has 21 days to arrange payment (LEAP, etc.). Agency *must* inform utility within 10 days of customer receiving Notice.	If informed by agency that applicant is not approved *or* 21 days elapse, distributor has 11 days to disconnect customer.	

- Important for agencies to know the timeline, since utilities may disconnect 10 days after the Disconnection Notice is received, *unless* informed by an agency that they are assessing a customer/applicant.
- Once utility puts a hold on disconnection, 21 day period begins even if hold is obtained on the first day of the disconnection notice period.

Application Process continued

Step #5: Recommendation about Funding

- Once information has been verified, Intake agency makes recommendation on funding.
  - Important to consider if funding will maintain connection.
- Recommendation and supporting documents sent to Lead agency.
  - Caseworkers should ensure application package is complete when sent to lead agency.

Application Process

Step #6: Lead Agency Review

- Lead agency reviews application & makes final decision on funding.
- Applicant informed of decision.
- If approved, customer information and grant amount added to Standard Payment Remittance Form.
- Form & cheque sent to appropriate service provider according to agreed upon schedule.
  - Cheque to be accompanied by a list of customer names, account numbers & grant amount to be credited to each account.
  - Due to the timing of the cheque issuing process, applicants may receive another bill before LEAP funds are credited to the account. Applicants should be instructed to contact the Intake Agency to follow up, and not their service provider.

Application Process

Step #7: Referrals to Other Programs and Services

- Caseworker should make appropriate referrals to other programs that could help applicants, such as:
  - Financial planning;
  - Other housing assistance programs;
  - Utility/OPA conservation programs (where available).

Appeals process

- Each Lead agency responsible for having an appeals process, which must include an independent review.
- Sample appeals process & form is available in the Program Manual.
- Applicant should be informed of appeals process if application is denied.

Standard Forms

- The Manual includes template forms for use by agencies:
  - *Application for LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance*
  - *Consent to Disclosure of Personal Information*
  - *Payment Remittance Form*
  - *Request for Internal Review*
- For 2011, existing application forms may be used, as long as required information is collected.

Reporting

- Requirements set out in Appendix C of Program Manual.
- 3 forms of reporting:
  - Monthly reporting by agencies to utilities
    - Tracks each utility's LEAP funds spent over the course of the month.
    - To be submitted by agency by the 15th day of the following month.
  - Monthly tracking by agencies:
    - Tracks applicant demographic information for use in program evaluation.
    - Lead agency to keep and store data.
  - Annual reporting by utilities to OEB
    - Utilities will provide an annual report to the OEB for program evaluation.
    - Report is dependant on timely information from agency partners.
    - Lead Agencies to send complete data to utilities by January 31st of the following year.

Questions?

- Will Program Manual be available in French?
  - Yes. It will be posted on the OEB site when ready.
- Is there a master list of utility – agency partners?
  - Will be posted on OEB site when all submissions are received.
- Questions?
  - Questions can be asked through the Q&A tab in Microsoft Office Live Meeting or via telephone by pressing *1.

Contact Information

- **For additional questions, please contact:**
  - ***Market Operations Hotline:*** market.operations@oeb.gov.on.ca

- **For additional information on LEAP:**
  - ***visit the Board's website at:***

    www.oeb.gov.on.ca