

Energy Assistance for Frontlines Communities, to the Benefit of All

Washington residents are facing rapid increases in the cost of living, and with the state's growing population and a commitment to transition off of carbon-emitting electricity generation, consumers are seeing higher rates for energy service while utilities are required to expand and improve how they operate.

Energy assistance is available for residents with lower and fixed incomes and at risk from high utility debt and disconnection, but **the system is a patchwork with significant gaps that leave up to 80% of eligible households underserved**, and only a small percentage of low-income households are served by individual statewide programs. Transforming this patchwork into an integrated mechanism is key to meeting energy assistance needs.

Front and Centered is proposing a Washington Energy Assistance Trust designed to champion and ensure universally accessible energy assistance to energy burdened lower and moderate income energy customers.

The trust would be a permanent, quasi-governmental, and independent organization that collects and analyzes critical energy consumer and provider data to gauge needs relative to services; offers technical assistance and capacity to support utilities and assistance providers in meeting their obligations; and provides a statewide resource for bill, weatherization, and efficiency program participation assistance to eligible households whose need are not otherwise met.

Core Functions of the the Trust

- **Gather, host, and analyze data to assess disparities in energy need, service, access, and affordability** across the state based on economic and social factors. The analyses would define an equitable framework for determining resources and strategies required so that all Washingtonians have access to sufficient energy free from disconnection and energy burden, throughout the transition to clean and renewable power sources.
- **Support setting standards for equitable energy assistance and provide technical and capacity assistance to government, nonprofit, and utility programs** to meet and exceed the goals of the Clean Energy Transformation Act (2019) through customer protections, public participation, and community engagement in program design, operations, and governance. This includes direct assistance for utility customers with unmet need as a statewide alternative for assistance services (applications, eligibility, provision).

Process and Timeline

The Department of Commerce would determine the best pathway to establish the trust, phasing entity operations to commence in 2024. They may consider incubation within the agency, publish a request for proposals, or take other approaches for participatory design, incorporating assistance information and reporting. In line with priorities established in law and policy, Washington needs to take this opportunity to develop a statewide assistance center enabling utility customers and companies to benefit from assistance program coordination and funding. Program hiring and data collection would occur in FY 2023–2024, with initial customer funding to deploy in FY 2024–2025.