



EQUITY WORKING GROUP MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 28, 2023
Virtual Meeting: Zoom

Equity Working Group Members Present: Brooks Winner, Mary Wambui, Alexis Washburn, Stephanie Terach, Margie Lynch, Mary Wambui, Kyle Murray, Sonakshi Saxena, Jo Ann Bodemer, Cindy Luppi, Doug Quattrochi, James Collins, Jhenny Saint-Surin, Charlie Harak, William Rose, Maggie Downey

Equity Working Group Members Absent: (None)

Other Attendees: Adrian Caesar, Alissa Whiteman, Ina Dasso, Aladdine Joroff, Anxhela Mile, Bernetta Morton, Brandy Chambers, Briana Kane, Carolina Leins-Sultan, Chris McClellan, Degen Larkin, Emily Brown, Emma Zehner, Ian Finlayson, Kaira Fox, Katelyn Mazuera, Leah Cohen, Mary Downes, Melanie Coen, Sam Nigro, Brian Beote

1. Call to Order

Bodemer, acting as Chair, called the meeting to order at 12:03 PM.

2. Equity Working Group (EWG) Updates

There were no updates from the EWG.

3. Finalize EWG Recommendations for the 2025-2027 Three-Year Plan

Bodemer indicated that the EWG recommendations were developed with the intent of supporting distributive justice and the equitable delivery of energy-efficiency benefits to the public. Bodemer described changes to the draft EWG recommendations on the 2025-2027 Plan, including two charts showing recommended offers.

Luppi joined the virtual meeting at 12:08 PM.

EWG Discussion

Harak asked if the Department of Energy Resources incorporated proposed edits into the EWG recommendations for the 2025-2027 Plan. Bodemer confirmed that the proposed recommendations include all previous edits.

Winner expressed support for geographic targeting and proposed that the program administrators (PAs) prioritize the highest-priority, vulnerable communities to limit budget impacts. Winner suggested that the one-pager describing gas-to-electric-fuel switching include methods to mitigate bill increases from heat-pumps, such as enrolling on the discount rate and community-choice aggregation. Harak agreed.

Harak recommended that the PAs exclude rental properties above a certain size or vintage from automatic qualification for enhanced incentives in select geographic areas. Harak commented that gas-to-electric-fuel switching will impose large rent increases for tenants if landlords currently pay for central heating. Harak added that landlords cannot alter lease terms (e.g., heat included in rent) during the term of the lease and noted that central-gas heating is prevalent in multifamily buildings. Bodemer said that many entities, including the Office of the Attorney General, are debating how to mitigate adverse bill impacts from fuel switching but have not determined a solution. Harak said that managing increased energy burdens to tenants in these situations will be difficult without rent control.

Quattrochi suggested that the EWG recommendations state that the PAs will describe responsibilities for landlords who install heat-pumps and opportunities to mitigate bill increases.

Wambui commented that affordable-housing owners are concerned that solutions to mitigate tenant energy bill increases from fuel switching may unfairly push costs onto landlords, but that tenants should not bear the full expenses either. Wambui said that forecasted increases in electricity costs will necessitate rent increases.

Luppi said that the programs should ensure equitable access to comfortable spaces and improved indoor-air quality, but gas-to-electric-fuel switching has economic implications. Luppi said that the EWG should engage with the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) so it can propose a path forward that prioritizes affordability, equity, and reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions. Luppi suggested that a discounted-electricity rate for customers who convert to heat-pumps could potentially mitigate adverse bill impacts. Luppi reiterated that the EWG should request that the DPU investigate the bill impacts of fuel switching.

Quattrochi said that gas is cheap and reliable, despite its emissions impacts, and that the economics of gas systems for customers do not face as much scrutiny as heat-pump systems. Lynch characterized two scenarios: a central-heating system in a multifamily building in which the landlord pays bills converts to in-unit heat-pumps resulting in where customers face increased utility costs for renters, and individual tenant gas systems being converted to heat pumps. Lynch indicated that both scenarios involve adverse economic impacts for the customer due to the fact that electricity costs exceed gas costs.

Winner commented that improved delivery of the moderate-income program and removal of participation barriers may be just as important as increasing incentives. Winner said that there is

uncertainty about which service providers can best serve moderate-income customers and questioned whether adding more options will help reach such customers more effectively. Bodemer replied that the recommendation for simplified income-verification directs the PAs and EWG to work together to determine a solution. Bodemer said that a pilot for self-attestation of income is also included in the EWG recommendations.

Harak noted that simplifying the process for income-verification is important, particularly if the complex Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program process is the benchmark. Harak said that California has self-attestation for the discounted-energy rate where customers must provide follow-up documentation. Harak asked how the programs would rectify fraud or instances where customers make errors in self-attestation which result in higher incentives being paid to the customer erroneously. Bodemer responded that the pilot for self-attestation would help evaluate the degree to which customers abuse the system or make mistakes. Bodemer said that DOER will also administer federal funds that allow for self-attestation of income, which will provide additional insights. Harak supported self-attestation in a limited pilot to assess risks and determine a “recoupment mechanism” for faulty income reporting.

Lynch asked how much spending is allocated to the Community First Partnership (CFP) for 2022-2024 and whether the placeholders for quantitative recommendations would be populated before sharing the EWG recommendations with the Council. Bodemer said that the EWG can present its recommendations without specific numbers.

Washburn suggested that the recommendation to increase spending for the CFP should clarify whether participating partners will receive more funding or the total number of partnerships will increase. Lynch and Bodemer confirmed that the intent is to increase both funding for partners and the total number of CFPs, particularly EJMs.

Wambui asked if languages are excluded from the recommendation to provide language support if the language is not listed in the recommendations. Bodemer said that the intent is to comprehensively support the most common, non-English languages and then expand language access to include less prevalent languages. Wambui stated that this does not align with best practices for community development practices since every community is different. Bodemer said that the seven priority languages encompass a large share of the Commonwealth’s language-isolated customers. Wambui said that justice involves reaching all customers who have not been served by the programs, so language access needs to be flexible. Bodemer suggested that the recommendation can include a directive to provide language-access support for all languages.

Luppi asked if the EWG recommendations can consider the CFP as a vehicle to improve language access and address language isolation in specific communities. Luppi said that Malden has a high school with students that speak 70 languages, so local resources will be a major part of ongoing efforts to improve language access.

Quattrochi suggested that strategies for language access are needed to adequately cover languages with difficult character sets as they will require substantial work to develop comprehensive language-access services.

Murray left the virtual meeting at 12:59 PM.

Bodemer stated that the EWG developed a set of recommendations that will cause a measurable and incremental step toward equitable delivery of program benefits and thanked Alissa Whiteman for supporting the development of recommendations.

4. Adjournment

Bodemer, acting as Chair, adjourned the meeting at 1:00 PM.

Meeting Materials:

- Official Meeting Notice
- Meeting Link
- Agenda