

Ruth Stellmacher

From: Susann Kaltwasser <susann@kaltwasser.com>
Sent: Monday, April 22, 2019 4:43 PM
To: citycouncil; Chuck Bennett; Steve Powers
Cc: CHRIS HOY; CityRecorder
Subject: Utility Assistance program Item 3.3 on tonight's agenda
Attachments: Testimony on utility assistance program 42219.pages

Please enter my comments into the public record for tonight's meeting. I am ill and not able to attend in person, but I want to thank everyone who worked on the utility relief proposal. I know this is going to help a lot of people, although you know me and I still have suggestions for future relief that I have illustrated in my comments.

Thank you,

Susann

April 22, 2019

To:
Salem City Council
From:
Susann Kaltwasser
RE:
Utility Assistance Program Item 3.3 on agenda for April 22, 2019

I am sorry that due to illness I am not able to attend the meeting in person and thank you all personally for your proposal to expand the utility assistance program. It has been a long passion for me to help gain additional funding to assist low income people with their utility bills. As we know many people in Salem live on the edge of crisis due to economic situations. Reports say that in the United States today 40% of the populations living paycheck to paycheck cannot deal with a \$400 emergency. Salem surely has thousands of people who struggle each month to meet their living needs. Clearly the rising number of people who are homeless is testament to the situation.

Increasing the funds to help with utility assistance is very welcome and I know will help hundreds of people.

I am glad to see the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency has agreed to be a partner in administering this worthy and much needed program.

I have a couple of questions that were not mentioned in the staff materials:

1. Will the voluntary donation program continue and the funds collected be added to the program;
2. How will people learn about the assistance program;
3. How will staff determine who will get referred;
4. Will data be collected to help determine the effectiveness of the program as well as where there might be further needs not met by the criteria of the program;
5. Will data be collected to show how the assistance program impacts water shut-off rates.

Some comments on my questions:

1. I would like to see the donation program continue and be used to enhance the city's program and perhaps expand the number who can be served, or to allow for a second form of assistance for people who may need help more than once a year.
2. I worry that some people may not know about the assistance program if it is not advertised widely in both English and Spanish. Also, that it is on the utility bill itself and not something that is provided only to some people as determined by City staff when a bill is overdue or delinquent.
3. As mentioned, everyone should have an opportunity to avail themselves of the program and not be limited by a City staff referral.
4. I believe that it is important to keep good data as to who is getting relief and who does not. The data can help guide whether the program is meeting the intended goal or whether the program needs refinement. One of the things that has hampered the efforts in the past has been the lack of good data about need. How many people face water shut off? How many people only need a temporary assistance with a bill? How many people are making difficult decisions each month to pay for medications, food or utilities?
5. My goal is to not just help make it easier for low-income and elderly people pay for their utility bills, but to really impact those people who are at risk of losing their water service and are in danger of suffering health consequences to themselves or to vulnerable children. Some people may

qualify for the assistance program and are aware they can get a reduced rate, but may not be in an emergency situation where their health is at risk. I am not suggesting that they not get the benefit of the program, but I do think we need to continue to monitor the system so that the most needy are not still being neglected.

Again I am so pleased that the Council is willing to expand this program for assistance. I know that it is not as robust as some people, like me would like to see, but it is a step in the right direction after almost 20 years of advocacy. I'd love to see the program expanded by creating a system by which people might make a pledge to allow a small percentage of their utility payment (say 1%) go into a special relief fund.

I also would like to see the Council review water-shut off policies in general. Assistance is helpful, but some people have complained about how the decision for assistance is made.

A few examples of real people who have had their water turned off might illustrate gaps in the proposed program.

Example 1:

A mother of a 5-year old son is living with her mother. She works a part-time minimum wage jobs. Her mother has a steady job but it only pays slightly above minimum wage. Things are tight but they make it pay check to pay check. One day the woman's mother hurts her back and must undergo surgery. It is going to be 2 months of being off work. Finances are tight, but they are able to live on the small savings they have acquired. After the surgery the mother is on unpaid medical leave, but at least she will keep her job and can return to work. One month into her recovery the daughter is laid off her job. Now there is no money coming in and the savings are depleted. They beg and borrow from where they can, but now they have a \$94 water bill that they cannot pay. They are told they must pay the bill in full pithing 7 days or the water will be shut off. There is no way that they can find the money and because they have no history of low-income they might not qualify for the assistance program.

Example 2:

A married father of two small children is a victim of vandalism and all four tires on his car are slashed. He must replace the tires but his insurance has a \$500 deductible. He needs the car for his job in Dallas. His wife needs to get to work as well. So, they spend what funds they have saved to buy the new tires. Now this leaves the family vulnerable for the next economic disaster to strike. It comes in the form of a medical bill for \$1200 for a trip to the emergency room for one of the children. Now they are struggling with paying household bills. They ask the City for help with their water bill, maybe an extension. But eventually their water is turned off due to non-payment. They are in a situation where they need \$150 (\$125 for the bill and \$25 for the turn-on fee) to get their water back. having exhausted all of their options the father makes the difficult decision to not pay the car payment in order to get the water back on for his family.

Example 3::

A grandmother finds out that her husband who is the sole provider for the family has developed type 2 diabetes so bad that he is hospitalized over and over. They own their own business, but he is not able to work. They deplete all of their savings and she takes on a part-time job trying to help meet basic needs of the family. Medical bills and groceries put utilities at the bottom of their priorities. The other utility companies have been willing to work with the family. They get assistance, help with extensions on paying, or partial payment plans. But the City has deemed this account as chronically overdue. They are unwilling to work with the person. They eventually turn off the water. The grandmother must now go begging to friends and family for money. The husband is stressed out and his heath is made worse until now he is at risk of having a heart attack. He has lost his business by now. Then to add to the further complications his father who has been helping him through this rough patch passes away. Help is not coming, but through charity...that is not readily available.

Example 4:

A mother is living in a small house with Housing Authority voucher. She has a mental health issue that prevents her from working. She has two small children. DHS is monitoring her situation. She is getting help from Catholic Community Services with family counseling and parenting classes. She struggles to pay the bills as she has no fixed income. Her parents and family members are unable to help. The mother is told that she must keep her house clean and the children well cared for or they will have to take them from her and put them into foster care. She is worried everyday about her situation. She gets to a point where she is unable to pay her utility bill and she fears that her children will be taken from her because of no water. She can't handle the pressure and is hospitalized in crisis over the stress. There are no programs available to help this person because she in on Housing Authority assistance.

I hope that some of these cases might be helped with this new program, but I am not sure it will be the case. If we can't find solutions as a community a lot of families with children will continue to suffer. I will keep advocating until we as a community have answers for all.

Thank you for your work on this matter.

Sincerely,

Susann Kaltwasser
Ward 8