

Shall Council adopt Resolution 2021-36 restating the terms of the Emergency Utility Assistance Program, extending the effective date, and expanding qualification criteria?

RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt Resolution 2021-36 (Attachment 1) restating the terms of the Emergency Utility Assistance Program, extending the effective date, and expanding qualification criteria.

FACTS AND FINDINGS:

This staff report is a companion to report 21-403 authorizing the LIHWA Program agreement with Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency. Should the Council approve the City's participation in that program, staff recommends that utility customers qualified for the LIHWA Program be automatically qualified for the City's Emergency Utility Assistance Program.

Resolution 2021-36 accomplishes the following actions:

- Restates the terms of the Emergency Utility Assistance Program
- Extends the effective date for the increase in maximum annual assistance to December 31, 2022, from December 31, 2021, and
- Adds participation in the LIHWA Program administered by Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency (MWVCAA) as a way for Salem utility customers to automatically qualify for the City of Salem Emergency Utility Assistance Program.

The Emergency Utility Assistance Program had a balance of \$387,896 available to assist customers as of August 31, 2021. The last few months of assistance provided has averaged \$22,750 monthly to 184 residential accounts.

A portion of Salem's utility customers continue to fall behind in payment of their utility bill. As of August 31, there were 1,536 active accounts representing \$261,875 that were delinquent, eligible for disconnection, disconnected, or eligible for referral to a collection agency or certification for a tax lien through Marion County.

In addition, the Utility transferred \$1.1 million of delinquent receivables to a 12-month payment plan administered by the Finance Department. Approximately 35% of amounts invoiced have been paid. The LIHWA Program to be administered in partnership with MWVCAA may be used to assist customers with billed amounts on or after October 1, 2020.

BACKGROUND:

The Emergency Utility Assistance Program was approved by Council in 2004 to assist qualified City of Salem utility customers facing financial difficulties. Dependent on donations, program funding was

depleted annually. In 2016, the Water/Wastewater Task Force recommended a match of up to \$10,000 per year with utility rate funds. Since 2017, available funding has met or exceeded demand and assisted qualifying customers with urgent financial needs.

The program was readopted in 2019 and subsequently amended and expanded in April 2020, August 2020, and March 2020 to increase total funding available, expand qualification criteria for customers, increase maximum assistance per account, and extend the effective date of these changes. The proposed September 2021 changes further expand pre-qualification criteria and extend current provisions through December 2022 to all eligible customers to receive the full benefit of potential funding through the calendar year.

Alicia Blalock, Manager
Administration Division

Attachments:

1. Resolution 2021-36
2. Exhibit A to Resolution 2021-36