



LIHEAP

Innovations FAQ

LIHEAP PROGRAM AND APPLICATION

What is LIHEAP?

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a federally funded program that assists low-income households with home energy bills, energy crises, weatherization, and minor energy-related home repairs. For more than 40 years, the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) has partnered with Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the state to administer this critical assistance program at the local level.

Is Arizona Making Changes to LIHEAP?

Yes. Beginning in October 2022, DES is expanding LIHEAP access by establishing a statewide online portal to streamline the eligibility and payment process. The LIHEAP partnership with CAAs has helped DES understand opportunities to strengthen the network of care and assistance. LIHEAP has been administered at a local level for decades, allowing for significant variations in application requirements, business processes, and technology solutions. The opportunity exists to create consistent client experiences, remove barriers to assistance, and construct equitable access to the program.

Current access points for applicants will not be restricted and weatherization processes will not be affected. Community members may continue to apply for LIHEAP benefits through their local CAA with CAA staff entering the applications into the portal. Utilization of a statewide portal builds upon DES' expertise adjudicating applications and issuing benefits for more than 2.5 million Arizonans annually.

Administration of LIHEAP will transition from the CAAs to DES. This transition will involve integrating the program into an existing online portal and will only affect the eligibility determination and client payment disbursement functions of the program.

EXPANDING ACCESS

Currently, prospective LIHEAP applicants are required to apply using the methods established by each CAA. For some applicants, this may mean having to participate in a scheduled phone interview, while applicants residing in another region may have to interview with a CAA team member in-person.

The introduction of a consistent application process, available online anywhere in the state, will help remove barriers for those Arizonans who face difficulties scheduling appointments and those with limited transportation. DES recognizes that not all Arizonans have access to online services. To ensure these individuals have access to the program, DES will continue to accept applications through mail, fax, and community resource navigation pathways.

Those households that require additional assistance or prefer working with their local CAA may continue to do so. The Department has partnered with CAAs and other community-based organizations to serve as community resource navigators. These navigators will expand access points beyond existing CAA offices to meet individuals and families where they are. Navigators will engage with individuals and families to assess their needs and identify programs that best meet those needs. For households seeking LIHEAP assistance, community resource navigators will be able to intake applications, manually verify an applicant's identity, and upload documentation directly into the portal. This will allow LIHEAP applicants to engage with their CAA or other community partner as desired.

SIMPLIFIED APPLICATION AND DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS

LIHEAP applications and documents currently vary between CAAs. Some local agencies ask for information beyond what is federally required. These instances may create unnecessary burdens on households to qualify for LIHEAP and may dissuade households from applying or exclude households that actually meet the federal requirements. To remedy this, the Department will simplify the LIHEAP application and document requirements to include only what is federally required.

FASTER APPLICATION PROCESSING AND BENEFIT DISBURSEMENT

The time it takes to complete an application and receive a LIHEAP benefit may vary significantly by CAA, with some processes requiring applicants to engage in multiple conversations with CAA staff, resulting in a benefit delay of several days or weeks. Requiring

LIHEAP

Future Innovations Frequently Asked Questions

additional meetings may create disruptions and barriers for households needing to take time off work, or find child care and transportation.

The integration of LIHEAP into the DES portal will enable the Department to dramatically reduce the time it takes households to apply as well as the time it takes to determine eligibility and disburse benefits. For context, DES Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) and Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) applicants are able to complete their portal applications in less than 30 minutes, which are then determined eligible in less than three days. The same process will be applied to LIHEAP, resulting in faster assistance for those in need.

INCREASED ACCESS FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

LIHEAP has historically been administered on a first-come, first-served basis until funding is exhausted. This approach has left vulnerable populations (including seniors, individuals with disabilities, and households with small children) without access to LIHEAP. To ensure increased access, the Department is implementing statewide policies to set-aside funding for these vulnerable households and automatically enroll seniors in early recertification.

MEETING THE HOLISTIC NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

CAAs and other community-based organizations have established relationships with their communities and are best positioned to assess and address the unique needs of their residents. Through interviews, assessments, coaching and case management, CAAs will be able to create the transformative outcomes Arizona, as a community, desperately needs.

Over the last several years, CAAs have been forced to use a significant part of their workforce to administer transactional benefit programs such as LIHEAP. This has effectively diverted resources away from creating supports that lead to lasting transformation.

The transition of LIHEAP will allow DES to focus on eligibility determination, a function it performs for millions of Arizonans every year across dozens of state and federal programs. It will also provide an opportunity for CAAs to create capacity through community resource navigators, and tailor client approaches to meet the holistic needs of individuals, creating lasting independence.

How is the Online Portal Currently Used?

LIHEAP

Future Innovations Frequently Asked Questions

The online portal is currently being used by DES to administer ERAP and LIHWAP. The portal is convenient and straightforward, allowing applicants to safely apply or check the status of an application using a computer or mobile device at any time, day or night.

Will the DES Portal Require LIHEAP Applicants to Use ID.me?

To safeguard LIHEAP against fraud, all LIHEAP applicants self-serving through the portal will be required to use ID.me to verify their identity. However, the Department recognizes that approximately 5-10% of applicants may be unable to use ID.me. These households are encouraged to apply by calling the DES hotline, mailing or faxing a paper application and copies of the required documents, or through a community resource navigator. Navigators are able to manually verify an applicant's identity and intake applications while bypassing ID.me.

Will These Changes Affect Who is Eligible for LIHEAP?

No, all of the changes to the program are operational in nature and do not affect program eligibility.

How Will DES Ensure Funding is Available for Vulnerable Households Across the State?

DES will implement the following new policies to expand access and serve vulnerable Arizonans statewide:

CRISIS PRIORITIZATION

To ensure eligible households do not experience disruptions in heating and cooling, DES will prioritize applications for households whose services have been disconnected or are at risk of disconnection, and reserve 20% of its client funding to provide crisis benefits.

VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLD PRIORITIZATION

DES will reserve an additional 20% of its client funding to prioritize households with seniors, disabled individuals, and/or young children.

SENIOR RECERTIFICATION AUTOMATIC ENROLLMENT

The DES LIHEAP portal is designed to automatically enroll Arizonans over the age of 60 years old, so they receive electronic reminders to update their information and apply early for the next benefit period.

SEASONAL FUNDING AVAILABILITY

DES recognizes that year-round funding must be made available for all Arizona residents, whether they are facing frigid temperatures or extreme heat. Using prior seasonal data, DES will reserve 40% of its LIHEAP funding for energy costs during the months of October through March. The remaining 60% will be available from April through September.

What is DES' Plan to Communicate these Changes to Clients?

DES plans to update its website to include information about how to apply online, but does not currently plan to execute a broad communication plan or marketing campaign for the first several months of this change. This will allow the DES to continue to work collaboratively with CAAs and adjust its service delivery and processes to best meet the needs of Arizonans.

LIHEAP IMPACT TO PARTNERS

CAAs Currently Use LIHEAP Administrative Funding to Pay Employees. Are Their Jobs at Risk?

No, DES values the CAAs and is committed to ensuring they have the necessary capacity to assist households with LIHEAP as well as other assistance programs. Therefore, DES will continue to fund CAA operations in fiscal year 2023 at the same level it provided in fiscal year 2022 in order to support LIHEAP community resource navigation services. DES is hopeful to expand this model in the future to incorporate other department programs. This expansion may necessitate additional funding to CAAs.

Has the Department Tested This Concept?

Yes, DES currently partners with the Department of Child Safety, the Coconino County Community Services Department, and several refugee resettlement agencies to provide navigation services to individuals and families seeking ERAP and LIHWAP. These partnerships have allowed the DES to solicit and incorporate feedback to enhance the portal and improve processes. DES is committed to learning from all of its partners and to continuously improving its practices to create optimal outcomes for clients.

Will CAAs Receive Training?

Yes, DES will provide comprehensive programmatic training and portal training to support the CAAs and other community resource navigators beginning in early September.

How Will DES Support CAAs if They Have Questions or Concerns?

DES has established a community resource navigator hotline and email support team to quickly resolve any questions or concerns navigators have, including client-specific questions and help with technical issues.

Will These LIHEAP Changes Affect Tribal Regions in Arizona?

No, there will be no changes to how LIHEAP is administered by Arizona's 22 Tribes.