

Energy Assistance for Low Income Households in Peterborough City and County:

Recommendations

November 2002

Policy and Issues Sub-Committee,
Affordable Housing Action Committee (AHAC)

Recommendations for Action

Based on the review of energy market trends and issues, local indicators of need, local sources of energy assistance, and Canadian and American program models for energy assistance completed for the Background Report, the Policy and Issues Sub-Committee of the Affordable Housing Action Committee makes the following recommendations for the creation of an Energy Plan to Assist Low-Income Residents of Peterborough County and City:

Short term priority: (next 12 months)

1. That City and County Councils advocate that the provincial government stop deregulation of the electricity market and return to providing electricity to consumers at cost.
2. That Peterborough City Council resolves to operate the Peterborough Holdings Inc. (excluding the commercial activities of the Peterborough Utilities Inc) as a non-profit service provider.
3. That utility companies including Peterborough Utility Services, Hydro One, and Enbridge Gas institute crisis prevention and emergency assistance programs for low-income consumers, including, but not limited to: models in the background report regarding consumer protections, crisis prevention, transition assistance and emergency assistance.
4. Those utility providers formalize relationships with community housing and financial support programs to work towards preventing disconnection and possible homelessness through providing support to customers in crisis. These connections could include customer incentives, such as affordable payment plans, partial arrears forgiveness, and waiver of late fees or reconnection fees.
5. That City and County of Peterborough Social Services Department amend the Discretionary Benefits policy regarding Disconnection of Services or Pending Eviction to allow recipients to receive the maximum annual benefit toward energy costs including those incurred during the November- to-April heating season. Benefits should also be allocated to cover reconciliation charges under an equal billing plan.
6. That local utility providers who provide equal billing plans review these plans on a quarterly basis and notify customers of arrears accruing before they reach an unmanageable amount.
7. That the City and County of Peterborough Social Services Department and Ontario Disability Support Program employees ensure that recipients of Ontario

Works and ODSP are informed in timely and accessible ways about the existence of assistance programs and their eligibility for assistance.

8. That the City and County of Peterborough Social Services Department conduct an audit of Discretionary Benefits applications regarding energy costs and analyze the rate of approvals and refusals to ensure that the program is effective in assisting low income households in receipt of benefits.
9. That the crucial role of the Emergency Assistance Fund, administered by the Housing Resource Centre (of Community Counselling and Resource Centre), in preventing disconnections and evictions be reaffirmed, and that stable, increased funding be secured to ensure its continuation with adequate financial and staffing resources.

Medium term priority: (one to two years)

10. That AHAC support the funding and implementation of low income Energy Efficiency and Weatherization programs.
11. That AHAC and the City and County Councils work with other municipalities to encourage the provincial government to legislate / institute regulations requiring utilities to provide programs including, but not limited to:
 - Consumer Protections
 - Mandating and funding implementation of energy assistance programs to assist low income consumers
 - Policies and procedures around deposits and collections that do not create undue hardship
 - Disconnection moratoriums
 - Crisis Prevention programs
 - Rate discounts (based on a percentage of the bill)
 - Percentage of Income Payment Plans
 - Arrearage Management programs
 - Low income energy efficiency and weatherization programs
 - Transition Assistance
 - In adequate amounts to assist low income customers with the disproportionate energy burden they face
 - Emergency Assistance
 - Stable and adequate funding for emergency assistance programs

12. That City and County Councils pass a Vital Services By-Law to prevent disconnection of utility services for tenants where utilities are included in the rental payment and landlords fail to make full and timely payments.
13. That City and County Councils amend building codes / property standards by-laws re: weatherization and sources of heating in new and existing affordable housing and include provisions for increased enforcement.
14. That a coordinated, standardized system, including service agencies and energy providers, be created to track energy assistance needs in our community.

Long term priority: (two plus years)

15. That the Councils of the City and County of Peterborough advocate with the provincial government to amend the deregulated energy market in Ontario to better protect low income energy consumers.
16. That City and County Council advocate with the provincial government to increase shelter allowances to a level which allows persons in receipt of Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support (ODSP) to afford local market rents and utilities (as recommended in Community Plan).
17. That any future governmental rebates for energy costs should not be tied to GST, but should be structured to provide greater assistance to households demonstrating financial hardship.
18. That the provincial government implement regulations to extend consumer protections relating to retail energy providers ensuring that customers have a clear choice, that providers may not use hard-sell tactics, and that customers may change energy providers if they so choose.