

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE**  
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

**DATE:** August 21, 2020

**TO:** Supervisor Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Shakita LaGrant McClain, Interim Director, Department of Health and Human Services  
*Prepared by Cleopatra Echols, Program Manager, Energy Assistance Program*

**SUBJECT:** **Report from the Interim Director, Department of Health and Human Services, requesting authorization to enter into purchase of service contracts for the operation of the Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program (WHEAP)**

**Issue**

The Interim Director of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is requesting authorization to enter into purchase of service contracts with Community Advocates, Inc. and UMOS, Inc. to operate the Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program (WHEAP) for the 2021 Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) beginning October 1, 2020 and ending September 30, 2021.

Section 46.09 of the Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances requires County Board approval for the purchase of human services from nongovernmental vendors.

**Background**

The Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA), Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources (DEHCR) administers a statewide program to assist households with heating and electric bill payment assistance as well as benefits and services to assist with energy crisis situations. WHEAP serves as the umbrella program for the federally funded Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Public Benefits (PB) funded from fees collected through the electric utilities more commonly known as "Energy Assistance." LIHEAP focuses mainly on heating assistance such as natural gas, oil and propane while Public Benefits provides benefits for non-heating electric usage.

Section 16.27 of the Wisconsin Statutes governs the operation of WHEAP in the State of Wisconsin and prescribes a role for counties in delivering such assistance. In addition, section 46.215 of the statutes specifically addresses Milwaukee County's role in providing energy assistance to eligible residents.

***Funding***

For FFY2020 (October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020), DHHS received about \$4 million (base funding allocation and amendments) to administer the Energy Assistance Program for Milwaukee County. The two

subcontractors, Community Advocates, Inc. and UMOS, Inc., received \$3.2 million of this funding to operate a call center, scheduling system and six sites across the county. In addition, IMPACT, Inc. received \$41,838 in funding for the 2-1-1 community call line which serves as an access point and safety net for the emergency furnace program and provides 24-hour referral services and after-hours coverage for the Energy Assistance Program. 2-1-1 also provided proactive scheduling to Milwaukee County residents in an effort to be aligned with the department's "No Wrong Door" vision and serve customers more quickly. In a separate report pending in the September cycle, DHHS is recommending an amendment of \$50,000 to IMPACT's contract for these services.

### *Applications*

Historically, Milwaukee County consistently processed nearly 30 percent of all the applications in the state and in FFY2020, reached 57,000 applicants to date. During the heating season, the program assisted over 57,000 households, administering \$29 million in regular benefits and nearly \$3.2 million in crisis assistance to the community to date. While total applications continue to be down across the state for FFY2020, and comparable urban counties such as Racine are down over 10 percent, Milwaukee County's decrease is greater at 14 percent. This plummet in applications is a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Discussion**

#### *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic*

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Milwaukee County experienced a reduction in its applications compared to previous years. It is assumed that this decrease is the result of the pandemic's widespread impact on both residents and staff. In prior years, the program generally received a rush of customers in April and May, serving between 5,000 to 8,000 residents. In 2020, however, the program served between 2,000 to 5,000 in the same timeframe and calls were down as the community may not have felt the urgency to apply. People were coping with additional responsibilities around caring for their children and other family members. Impending evictions as well as increased social isolation also burdened our residents and may have reduced a sense of urgency around applying for Energy Assistance.

At the onset of the pandemic, providers worked swiftly to transition to non-contact telephonic services. The transition to this new model occurred so rapidly we needed to move quickly to ensure staff had the appropriate resources. The transition resulted in many rescheduled appointments as well as backlogs of voicemails. Additional staff were borrowed from other programs and counties to support the customer volume while Milwaukee County Energy Assistance teams gained stabilization. Currently, the program is fully staffed and is experiencing stable employee availability.

Outreach efforts that were scheduled to increase applications were cancelled due to the Safer at Home Order and the need to social distance. Most of the planned outreach for this year focused on in-person events. The schedule generally peaks between March to July so these cancellations impacted our ability to connect with residents and explain the services, schedule appointments and/or complete applications on site.

In response, we have become more creative with our outreach and marketing. We have increased our radio ads and social media presence as well as created commercials and You Tube videos to keep the community informed. We also sent additional postcards to over 200,000 households that are aligned with the 2020 revised income guidelines encouraging residents to apply. Finally, we established partnerships with local grocery stores so that our flyers could be placed in grocery bags and/or posted at their locations to expand our reach in the community.

We also organized a group of team members to conduct direct outreach by calling customers and scheduling appointments and/or taking applications in real time over the phone. In addition, we have increased support provided by IMPACT 2-1-1, the Aging Resource Center and the Disability Resource Center which includes proactively asking all of their customers if they have applied for Energy Assistance and if they have not, the intake specialists assist customers in scheduling appointments. We also sent mass text and email reminders to Milwaukee County residents encouraging them to apply.

#### *Service Model*

Since FFY2016, the program has provided a “customer first” service model focusing on service with dignity and respect. The program currently operates six application intake sites across Milwaukee County. Most residents are within five miles of an application location. All sites are handicapped accessible and are on a major bus route. Historically, customers can walk in anytime during the business day, call for an appointment, or schedule an appointment on-line. Customers wait less than 10 minutes to be seen and usually complete the entire process in less than an hour.

The program also operates a call center (located at Community Advocates on James Lovell Street) that receives over 80,000 calls annually, answering over 75 percent of the calls live, and returning calls the same day or next day. Proximity to home or work, access by bus, and one-hour services are highly desirable requirements (rated five out of five) to over 71 percent of customers polled in an independent customer service study conducted by Opinion Access for the program.

All sites operate year-round. During the peak spring and fall seasons, sites will operate extended hours from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weeknights and from 8 a.m. to noon on Saturdays.

#### **2019-2020 sites:**

North	6900 W Brown Deer Road
Northwest	4907 W Fond du Lac Avenue
West Allis	6761 W. Greenfield Avenue
Bay View	2701 S. Chase Street
Downtown/Central	728 N. James Lovell Street
South	5663 S. 27 <sup>th</sup> Street

### *Transition to Non-Contact Service Model*

The FFY2021 Service Model is being revised to enable a high rate of non-contact service to reduce health and safety risks to residents and employees. The transition to this model began this past spring and is anticipated to eventually include:

- Increased phone and online applications (non-contact services)
- Increased rate of same day application processing
- A reduction in service locations
- Increased support from Impact 211
- Centralization of the call center
- Database integration
- Increase in resource referrals for residents

Since March, additional tools and procedures were implemented to enable a more efficient application process that includes completing the application during one contact and obtaining verifications by electronic methods. This will soon increase the number of applications fully processed on the same day as the appointment and will hopefully, result in increased customer satisfaction and more customers served. Historically, with the use of mailing and customer drop off for verification processes, many residents received two to three appointments and it took up to two weeks before their application was completed. Awaiting pending verifications also resulted in moderate rates of denied applications because the intake system only allows an application to stay open for 30 days without the verification being entered. The phone applications have received a positive response from residents and the plan is to continue phone applications as the primary method of application processing in the new season.

In July 2020, the State online application portal launched providing an additional non-contact way for Milwaukee County residents to apply for assistance. The combination of offering both the phone and online options to customers is expected to reduce the amount of in-person visits and is likely to increase applications at the start of the season. Given the anticipated uptick in online and telephonic applications and mitigating risk around the spread of COVID-19, we are exploring the potential for reducing the number of in-person locations. This would allow funding to be redirected to the additional employee hours needed to conduct phone applications and manage the online applications. If there are any changes to locations this season, DHHS will notify the County Board.

### *Outreach*

Energy Assistance workers have historically visited over 100 senior meal sites, senior housing sites, apartment complexes, government-assisted housing complexes, and community events to accept applications. Due to the pandemic, this did not occur at a normal level this year. In FFY2021, we intend to develop and implement an outreach plan that will ensure this population continues to have access to services. Residents will have an opportunity to learn how to access technologies such as apps and email that will enable them to complete their application virtually without putting their health and safety at risk.

*Best Practices*

To ensure best practices and compliance with all state and federal regulations, DEHCR performs an annual administrative review of Milwaukee County. The program’s procedures in quality assurance, outreach and customer service have been recognized by the state as “best practices” and have been presented at the annual state conference for other Energy Assistance providers.

To ensure the best possible service and outcomes in Milwaukee County, the Energy Assistance Program is guided by the Energy Assistance Steering Committee. This committee is made up of community partners, such as We Energies, weatherization agencies, county departments serving vulnerable populations, community agencies and the state’s DEHCR staff.

In addition, customer input has been integral to the decision process. Customer feedback has been solicited at each site in real time during the season and through an independent customer service survey. These measures are an ongoing part of the program’s quality assurance plan.

FFY2021 Provider Contracts

The FFY2021 provider contract recommendations are based upon the percentage of applications processed in FFY2020 as well as the planned outreach activities and initiatives developed to reach potential applicants. DHHS’s ability to execute these contracts will be contingent upon review and approval by the DEHCR. Any contract increases received by DHHS during the course of the State contract period will be passed onto both agencies based on the same calculations used to determine the above figures, program needs, funding source and/or state directives and initiatives.

DHHS is recommending 12-month contracts be awarded for the period of October 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021 to Community Advocates, Inc. and UMOS, Inc. as follows:

<b>Community Advocates, Inc.</b>	<b>\$1,421,268</b>
<b>UMOS, Inc.</b>	<b><u>\$728,877</u></b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,150,145</b>

Funding to support these contracts as well as county staff and overhead costs is provided by the State WHEAP contract. The current State WHEAP contract was approved under File No. 18-634 for a five-year term effective October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2023. Although funding is regulated by state statute, it is contingent on Federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funding. The State has advised DHHS that the funding level will be consistent with the FFY2019-20 base funding of \$2.7 million.

Because the provider contracts end on September 30, 2020, DHHS is seeking approval of these contracts in the September cycle without notification of the final State allocation to maintain continuity of services. If the actual funding included in the State WHEAP contract is less than the \$2.7 million assumed in the budget, the agency contracts will be reduced and DHHS will inform the County Board of this change.

**Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors authorize the Interim Director of the Department of Health and Human Services, or her designee, to execute FFY2021 contracts for the period of October 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021 with Community Advocates, Inc. in the amount of \$1,421,268 and with UMOS, Inc. in the amount of \$728,877 for a total of \$2,150,145. Further, the Interim Director is authorized to amend the contracts upon receipt of any addenda from the State DOA increasing Milwaukee County's WHEAP contract during FFY2021.

**Fiscal Impact**

Each of the recommended contracts is funded with WHEAP revenue, and approval of the recommendations delineated above would have no additional tax levy impact beyond what has been allocated in the DHHS 2020 Budget and 2021 Requested Budget. A fiscal note form is attached.

*Shakita LaGrant-McClain*

Shakita LaGrant McClain, Interim Director  
Department of Health and Human Services

cc: County Executive David Crowley  
Sup. Jason Haas, Chair, Finance Committee  
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