



# Customer Assistance Program





# Customer Assistance Programs

## Who are we?

The Customer Assistance Program (CAP) encompasses all of the City of Austin sponsored programs designed to assist moderate to low-income customers in regards to their utility bill.

## What do we do?

The goal of the Customer Assistance Program is to maximize the participation of eligible City of Austin utility customers by better promoting and presenting these programs to utility customers, civic, public, and private organizations.

## Why?

Austin Energy promotes programs designed to provide assistance to customers in the areas of financial support, case management, dispute resolution, energy efficiency improvements and water conservation.



# Program Components

- **Discounts**
- **Financial Support Plus 1**
- **Medically Vulnerable Registry**
- **Education Classes**
- **Weatherization**
- **Community Connections Resource Fair**
- **Case Management Project**
- **Affordable Energy Policy Summit**
- **Pilot Projects**

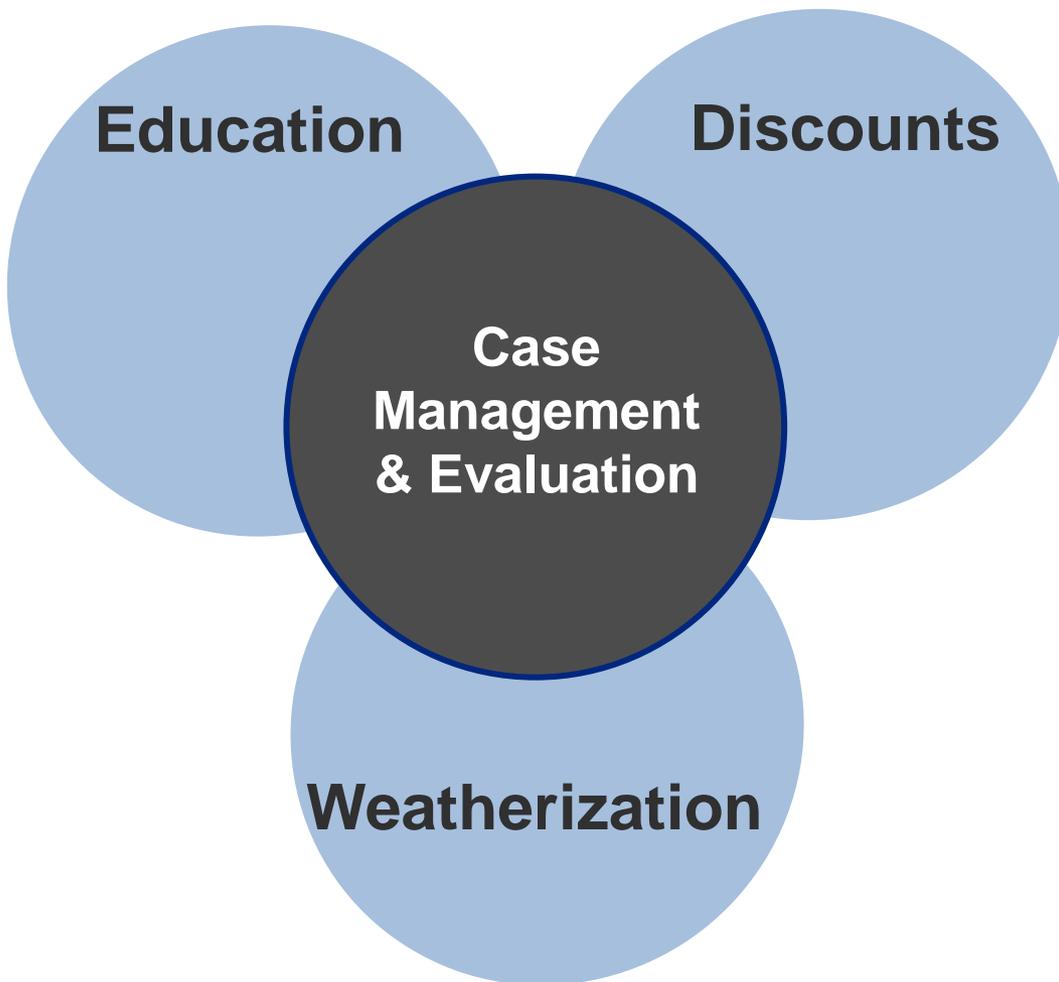


# Discount Program-Description

Provides significant monthly discounts to City of Austin utility customers for a continuous 12 month period. The average customer is provided about \$64 in monthly discounts



# Discount Program – The Present





# Discount Program-Description

## Discounts available

- Electric Service Customer Charge waiver
- Discount (10%) on total electrical usage
- Discount on Community Benefit Charge (CAP)
- Water Service Customer Charge waiver
- Water Tiered Fixed Charge Waiver
- Water Volume Charge discount
- Wastewater Service Customer Charge waiver
- Drainage Fee 50% discount



# Discount Program-The Present

## Education component

- Required pre-requisite for all weatherization program participants
- One interactive 4 hour class for the whole family
- Flexible class schedules
- Spanish classes available

## Weatherization component

- Targets high usage customers
  - (4mth  $\geq 2,500$  kWh or 6mth  $\geq 1,500$  kWh)
- Home energy audit
- Appliance replacement



# Discount Program-The Present

Utility Discount Program ( <u>electric only</u> )	
<b>Customers Served</b>	<b>43,029</b>
<b>Average Household Savings Per Month</b>	<b>\$23.00</b>
<b>Customer Savings</b>	<b>\$11,921,603</b>

\*Numbers from FY06-12



# Plus 1-Description

The Financial Support Plus 1 program helps customers who are having financial difficulties and are unable to pay their utility bill due to unexpected emergencies.



# Plus 1-The Present

## Financial Support Plus 1 Program

<b>Expensed</b>	<b>\$2,041,957</b>
<b>Households Served</b>	<b>10,761</b>

\*Numbers from FY06-12



The City of Austin offers the Medically Vulnerable Registry for customers with life support equipment, a serious illness or chronic illness. Eligible customers receive additional time to pay their bills in addition to one-on-one case management.



## Medically Vulnerable Program

- Expanded protections
  - Life Support equipment (228 HH)
  - Critical Illness (43 HH)
  - Serious Illness (16 HH)
- Home visits
  - New enrollments
  - Yearly contact
- Referrals to other social service providers
- One-on-one case management
- Manual collections process
- Third party notification



# Other Program Components

## Case Management Project

- Community based organizations serving high risk populations
  - Families with children who have severe medical issues
  - Elderly low income
  - Families struggling with HIV/AIDS
  - Homeless veterans
- Single point of contact from Austin Energy
  - Customer Solution Coordinators (CSC)
  - Direct contact with agencies
  - Create comprehensive action plans
  - Flexibility in policy decisions



# Other Program Components

## Community Connections Resource Fair

- Utility meets customer at community level
- Holistic approach to customer service
- One-stop place to reach basic needs services
- Targets low to moderate income customers
- Focuses on high poverty zip codes
- Over 800 participants with over 90 community agencies represented



# Other Program Components

## Refugee Project

- Two agency collaboration
  - Refugee Services of Texas
  - Caritas
- Customers denied services because of inability to provide a valid ID
- Worked within the confines of our service regulations
  - Potential customers were vetted by federal government
  - Utilized I-9 ID's as a temporary ID
  - 6 weeks later social security number is provided
- Account case managed by Austin Energy
  - Accounts in customer's own name
  - Accounts are managed until social security numbers are provided
- Customer case managed by Referring Agency
  - Education about utility bill
  - Understanding a utility bill
  - How to manage their utility bill
  - Paying their utility bill



# Other Program Components

## Affordable Energy Policy Summit

- Introduces utility changes to the community
- Communication avenue for community partners
- Community Input
- Targets local social service providers
  - Non-profits
  - Faith-based groups
  - Government agencies
  - Advocacy groups
  - Low income housing representatives



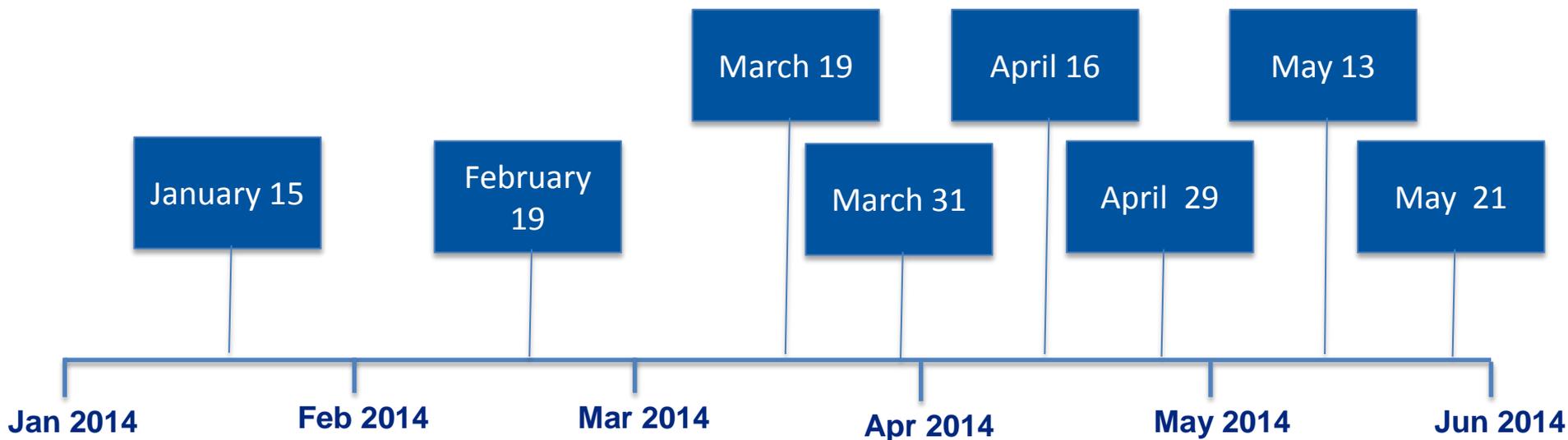
City Manager to work with Discount Steering Committee and other consumer advocates to:

- **Revise Deferred Payment Arrangements & disconnection policies**
- **Develop an Arrearage Management Program (best practices & customer incentives)**
- **Develop customer service practices to better inform customers about resources**



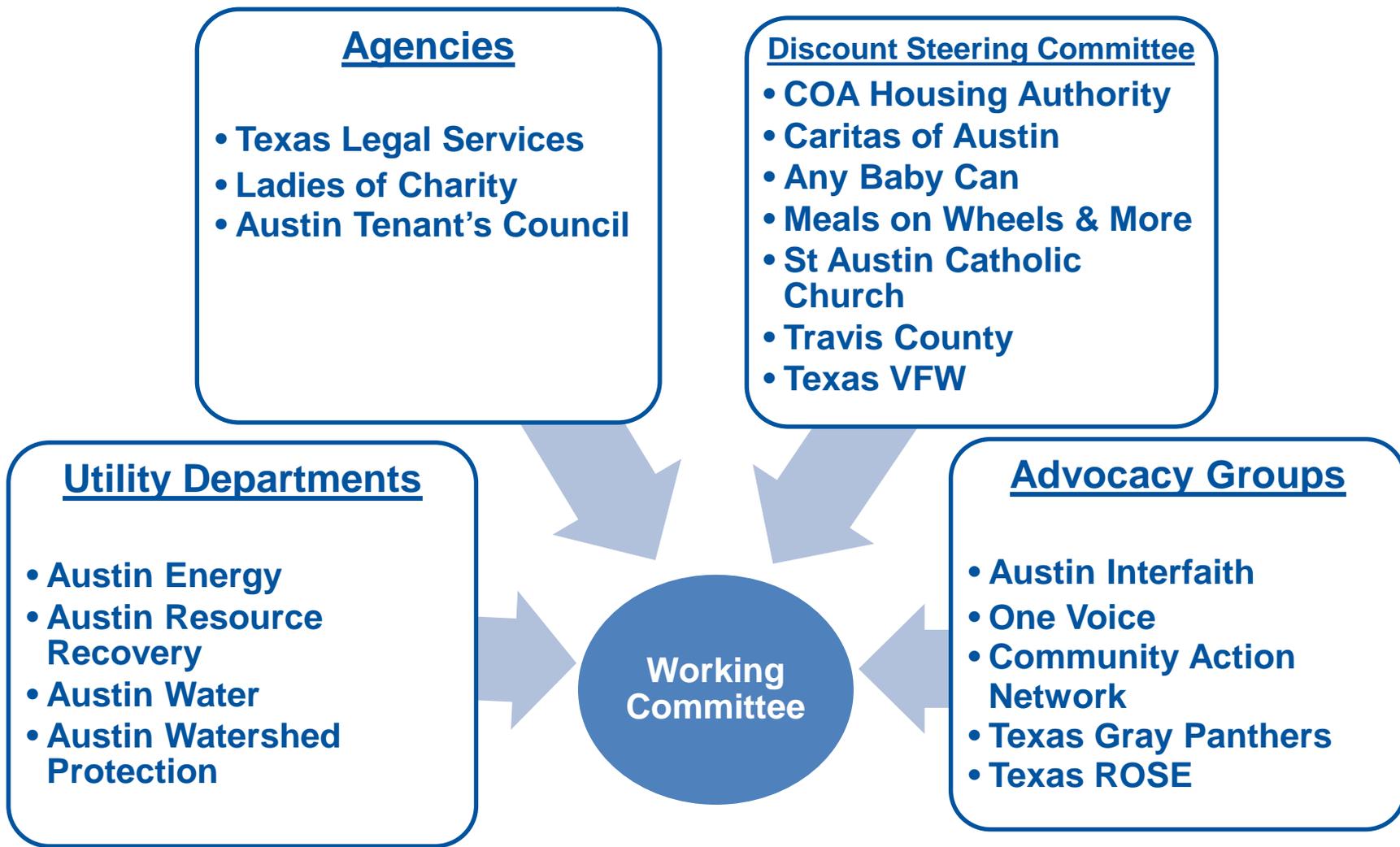
# Recommendation Process

- Facilitator contracted – Robena Jackson Agency
- Developed Group Structure
  - Stakeholder Committee (Non-Voting)
  - Working Committee (Voting)
- 8 Working Group meetings
- Analyzed over 150 data sheets
- Over 25 hours of meeting time





# Low Income Consumer Working Group





# Working Group's Payment Arrangement Policy

	Council Mandated Current Policy	Recommended Policy for CAP	Recommended Policy for Non-CAP
<b>Target Population</b>	Low Income Critically Ill Elderly Households w/ children	Low Income Regular Residential Critically Ill Elderly Households w/ young children	General Residential
<b>Eligibility</b>	Low Income Critically Ill Elderly Households w/ children	CAP Discount Customers	General Residential
<b>Length of Term</b>	\$48 maximum for discount participants (No limit on term length)	As defined by a monthly payment not to exceed 5% of U.S. Dept. of HHS monthly poverty guideline for single person household	Up to 24 months, if needed (CSR) Up to 36 months (Supervisors)
<b>Number of PA's Allowed</b>	3 Payment Arrangements, 4th Payment Arrangement for any customer identifying a "Bona Fide" Reason *	<b>Unlimited</b> -as long as the account is brought to \$0 balance before the account becomes eligible again.  <b>Limited</b> -Those with broken arrangements can have 3 Payment Arrangements/4th with "Bona Fide" Reason*	
<b>Down Payment</b>	NO	NO	Yes -Down payment equal to first month installment

\*Bona Fide Reasons= serious illness or injury by account holder or household member; loss of employment; economic loss due to natural disaster; domestic violence against the customer; a commitment by an independent program to assist customer with payment



# City Response to PA Policy Recommendations

	City of Austin Utilities Response to CAP Policy	City of Austin Utilities Response to Non-CAP Policy
<b>Target Population</b>	Low Income Regular Residential Critically Ill Elderly Households w/ children	General Residential
<b>Eligibility</b>	CAP Customer	General Residential
<b>Length of Term</b>	<b>36 month maximum;</b> Payment not to exceed 5% of FPIL	Up to <b>8 months</b> (CSR) Up to <b>12 months</b> (Supervisors)
<b>Number of PA's Allowed</b>	Unlimited-as long as the account is brought to \$0 balance before the account becomes eligible again.  Limited - Those with broken arrangements can have <b>2 Payment Arrangements/3rd</b> with "Bona Fide" Reason	Unlimited-as long as the account is brought to \$0 balance before the account becomes eligible again  Limited -Those with broken arrangements can have <b>1 Payment Arrangement/2nd</b> with "Bona Fide" Reason
<b>Down Payment</b>	NO	Yes - <b>50% down</b> , exceptions approved by Supervisors

\*Differences between Working Committee recommendation and City response are shown in red.



# Working Group's Arrearage Management Program

	Program for CAP Participants	Program for Specialty Group (Non-CAP)
<b>Eligibility</b>	Enrolled or waitlisted on the discount program	Active residential customer who had service with AE from June 2011 to June 2013 (Non Disconnect Period)
<b>Benefits</b>	Immediate incentive towards debt (match/credits begin month 1 of program) Leverage AE current services (education classes and weatherization)	
<b>How to Apply?</b>	Discount Participant	Already in place
<b>Length of Program</b>	<i>Determined by amount of debt;</i> \$1,750-\$3,000 = 12 months \$3,001-\$6,000 = 24 months \$6,001+ = 36 months	<i>Determined by amount of debt;</i> \$1,750-\$3,000 = 12 months \$3,001-\$6,000 = 24 months \$6,001+ = 36 months
<b>Down Payment</b>	Not required	
<b>Payment Amount</b>	20%/80%, 30%/70%, 40%/60% with cap of 5%	40%/60%, 30%/70%, 20%/80%
<b>Removal from Program</b>	*2 strikes rule 30 day no contact = strike Default payment = strike NSF = strike	
<b>Program Administration</b>	Austin Energy	
*Consensus not reached on items that are shaded in yellow.		



# City Response to Arrearage Management Program

	Program for CAP Participants	Program for Specialty Group (Non-CAP)
<b>Eligibility</b>	Enrolled or waitlisted on the discount program	<p><b>An arrearage management program is not recommended for this group.</b></p> <p>City recommends a special <b><u>60-month</u></b> Payment Arrangement:            Down payment equal to first month installment</p> <p>Unlimited-as long as the account is brought to 0 balance before the account becomes eligible again.</p> <p>Limited - Those with broken arrangements can have 2 Payment Arrangements/3rd with "Bona Fide" Reason*</p>
<b>Benefits</b>	Immediate incentive towards debt (match/credits begin month 1 of program) Leverage AE current services (education classes and weatherization)	
<b>How to Apply?</b>	Discount Participant	
<b>Length of Program</b>	<i>Determined by amount of debt;</i> $\$1,750-\$3,000 = 12 \text{ months}$ $\$3,001-\$6,000 = 24 \text{ months}$ $\$6,001+ = 36 \text{ months}$	
<b>Down Payment</b>	Not required	
<b>Payment Amount</b>	20%/80%, 30%/70%, 40%/60% with cap of 5%	
<b>Removal from Program</b>	2 strikes rule 30 day no contact = strike Default payment = strike NSF = strike Can reinstate as long as they "catch up" the account to the point they were removed	
<b>Program Administration</b>	Austin Energy	

Differences between Working Committee recommendation and City response are shown in red.



# Training & Customer Service Practices

Advocacy Group Recommendation	City of Austin Utility Current Program Components
<p>Inquiries and referrals to assistance and conservation and efficiency programs would be part of the conference between the customer and the AE Customer Care employee</p>	<p>New hire training includes 15 hours of training on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Determining that a customer needs help when it hasn't been explicitly stated</li> <li>-Difference between a high bill due to AE error vs. high bill due to usage patterns</li> <li>-Analyzing usage patterns Identifying conservation programs that may benefit the customer</li> <li>-Connecting customer with assistance agencies</li> </ul> <p><i>Refresher training provided as needed</i></p>
<p>As part of the referral process, there should be an explanation of any arrearage programs including providing the customer application forms and instructions.</p>	<p>If and when an arrearage program is created and funded, the training curriculum will be update to include all of the aforementioned items.</p>
<p>Develop training modules to instruct Customer Care employees on performing one to one customer conferences in a compassionate manner with a focus on empathy and consistency of service.</p>	<p>All new hires complete a 12 hour Customer Relationship Building class. The focus is on improving the customer experience through communication.</p> <p>Employees are also coached on these concepts during monthly call quality coaching sessions</p>
<p>Develop referral forms that would tailor contact persons and their contact numbers to greater enable customers with bill paying problems to connect with available resources. Application forms should be provided to the customer.</p>	<p>Referring customer to available resources is covered within the 15 hours of training covered on assistance agencies and conservation</p>
<p>Empower Customer Service Representatives to ensure AE staff have flexibility in working with customers to develop a realistic and reasonable solution to their utility bill problems.</p>	<p>New hire training includes 12 hours of training on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Working with customer to create a payment arrangement that sets the customer up for success</li> <li>-Engaging other AE workgroups</li> <li>-Tying in topics already covered about conservation and assistance agencies</li> </ul> <p><i>Refresher training provided as needed</i></p>
<p>New hire training includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-125 hours of classroom instruction</li> <li>-75 hours of trainer supported phone time</li> </ul> <p>New hires transition to a nesting environment in the call center for 4 to 6 weeks directly after new hire training</p>	



# Questions?