

8/19/2015 Draft Recommendation Number _____
Provision of Air Conditioners in
Low Income Weatherization Program

Recommendation: To make window unit air conditioners the standard air conditioning application in the low income weatherization program and to include under limited circumstances, repair and replacement of central air conditioners.

Targeted Underserved Group: Low income customers

Time Schedule: Implementation in 2016

Budget Impact: Accomplish within current budget.

Brief Description: To make window unit air conditioners the standard air conditioning application in the low income weatherization program and to include under limited circumstances, repair and replacement of central air conditioners

Community need: The summer weather in Austin is extremely hot for certain periods of time. When the heat index reaches 102, Austin Energy, is prohibited from disconnecting a customer's service¹ because air conditioning is necessary to protect a resident's health and safety especially the elderly and young children.² While it is possible to live through an Austin summer with no air conditioning, people without air conditioning in their homes are encouraged to take shelter in public buildings with air conditioning during the hottest times of the day.

Over one-fourth (118,241) of Austin Energy's residential customers have incomes that qualify for Free Weatherization.³ Customers living with income below 50% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (FPG) spend 37.6% of household income on electricity. Those at 51 to 100% of FPG spend 11.3% and those at 101 to 200% FPG spend 5.9%. Those above 400% of the FPG spend 1.6%.⁴

As utility bills increase because of higher rates and the pass through surcharges for regulatory costs, community benefit charge and other charges, low income customers are the most profoundly impacted by increases. As utility bills rise, the energy burden becomes an even higher percentage of those households on fixed and low incomes. There are large numbers of households in the Austin Energy service area with low income, high utility bills and very few energy efficiency program resources.

¹ Austin City Code §15-9-109.

² Sweating out a Texas heat wave, A guide to preventing hot weather illness.

³ Memorandum from Liz Jambor, EdD, Manager, to Low Income Consumer Advisory Task Force 01//5/15., p 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

In Texas, 26% of all home energy use is attributable to central air conditioning, 11% to the refrigerator, 9% to space heating, 7% to water heating and 2% to room air conditioning.⁵

Under the current program, a customer can participate in the low income weatherization program and be left with no source of air conditioning.

Program Description: Provide a recipient of low income weatherization services access to the most cost efficient and technically feasible measures that will meet the basic cooling needs of the low income residents. In many circumstances this will involve the installation of one or two window units. Under limited circumstances in homes originally designed with central air conditioning and where the installation of window units is uneconomic because of needed structural modifications a central unit may be repaired or replaced.⁶

Other considerations are coordination with the gas company program to acquire additional program resources for customers living in mixed fuel homes.

Future participation in the weatherization program is currently restricted to once every ten years. This time limitation is appropriate for the installation of building performance measures. In regard to installed window units and central air conditioning repair, customers should be eligible to reapply at the end of useful life of the window unit or repair. Decisions about repair and replacement of equipment should be made to ensure to the best of the evaluator's ability that the repair or replacement will provide reliable service to the eligible customers until the customer and property are eligible to reapply for the program. If a repair or replacement dysfunctions before the end of its expected useful life , the customer the customer may contact the program for the needed repair.

⁵ GDS Associates, Evaluation of Austin energy's ARRA-Supported Weatherization Assistance Program, September 2012, p. 51.

⁶Additional criteria should be developed to define the limited circumstances.