

Austin Energy Medically Vulnerable Registry



Objective

The objective of this audit was to determine if the City's Registry for the Medically Vulnerable effectively and efficiently serves residential customers in need.

Background

Power outages can be dangerous, especially to customers with critical illnesses or who depend on electricity for life-saving medical equipment. Most life support systems require a continuous power supply to function properly. Austin Energy, the City's electric utility, offers the Medically Vulnerable Registry (MVR) program. Eligible MVR customers receive case management and assistance creating an emergency back-up plan in the event of an outage.

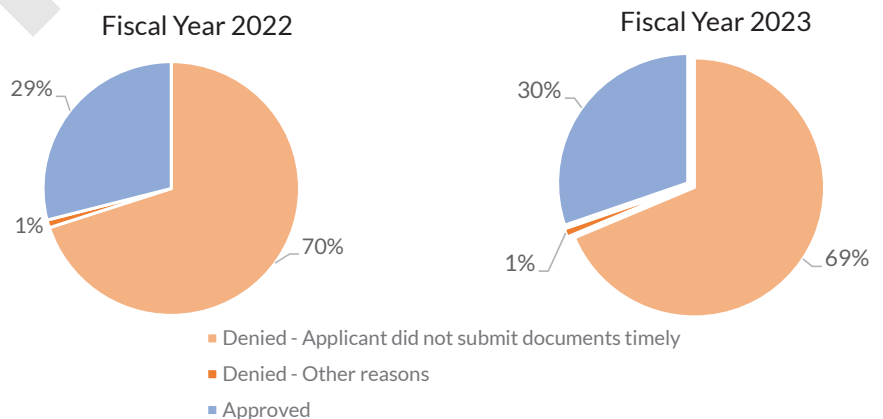
The City entered into an agreement with a third-party vendor, Solix, Inc. to manage eligibility verification for the MVR.

What We Found

Finding 1: Many Austin Energy customers are not able to access the City's Medically Vulnerable Registry due to a complex application process.

- Residents in apartment complexes with a master meter where the renters pay their property management for their utility bills are not able to participate in the MVR. Austin Energy management said there are 92 master meters.
- 45% of 31 MVR participants we surveyed noted the application process is inefficient due to the frequency of recertifications and difficulties obtaining a physician's signature.
- The City of Austin requires MVR participants to recertify more often than other cities. While Austin's recertification frequency ranges between 2-12 months, the cities we reviewed have recertification frequencies between 12-24 months. Sacramento offers a lifetime enrollment depending on the condition.

About 70% of applications were denied due to applicants not submitting documents timely



*In 2022, there were about 700 total applications and in 2023, there were about 1,000 total applications. Source: Auditor analysis of Austin Energy's Medically Vulnerable Registry data, January 2024.

Austin Energy noted that they are currently working on changes to the MVR application process. Austin Energy management is proposing City Code changes to City Council in May 2024.

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What We Found, Continued

Finding 2: The City mainly uses a manual process to manage the MVR application and eligibility verification. This increases the risk that the data may not be secure and reliable, and this may lead to inefficiencies.

- The MVR application process relies primarily on manual methods such as faxed or mailed paper applications. The manual tracking of applicant information across multiple tools increases the risk of errors and inefficiencies.
- We sampled 100 applications and found required information missing from several applications.

Issues Noted	Number of Applications
Missing Physician Signature	8
Missing MVR Category	24
Missing Patient or Account Holder Signature	43

Austin Energy management said an online process to apply to the MVR will be completed in September 2024.

Additional Observation: The City of Austin’s Medically Vulnerable Registry program appears to offer more services than similar programs from other cities we reviewed.

While other cities’ programs indicated that they notify customers of planned outages and provide extra time for the program participants to pay electric bills, Austin also:

- Offers personalized case management, including site visits.
- Helps customers establish an emergency back-up plan.

Overall, MVR participants we surveyed appear to be satisfied with the program and believe that the program meets their expectations.

What We Recommend

The General Manager of Austin Energy should:

- Work with stakeholders to resolve challenges accessing the Medically Vulnerable Registry, including evaluating the frequency of recertification requirements and the possibility of a wider range of entities who are allowed to certify eligibility.
- Incorporate an online option to receive application and recertification documents and re-organize the existing application to ensure sections filled by the applicant and the physician are well-aligned.