



Minnesota's Energy Assistance Program Evaluation

July 17, 2023

Tracy M.B. Smetana | Energy Affordability Section Director

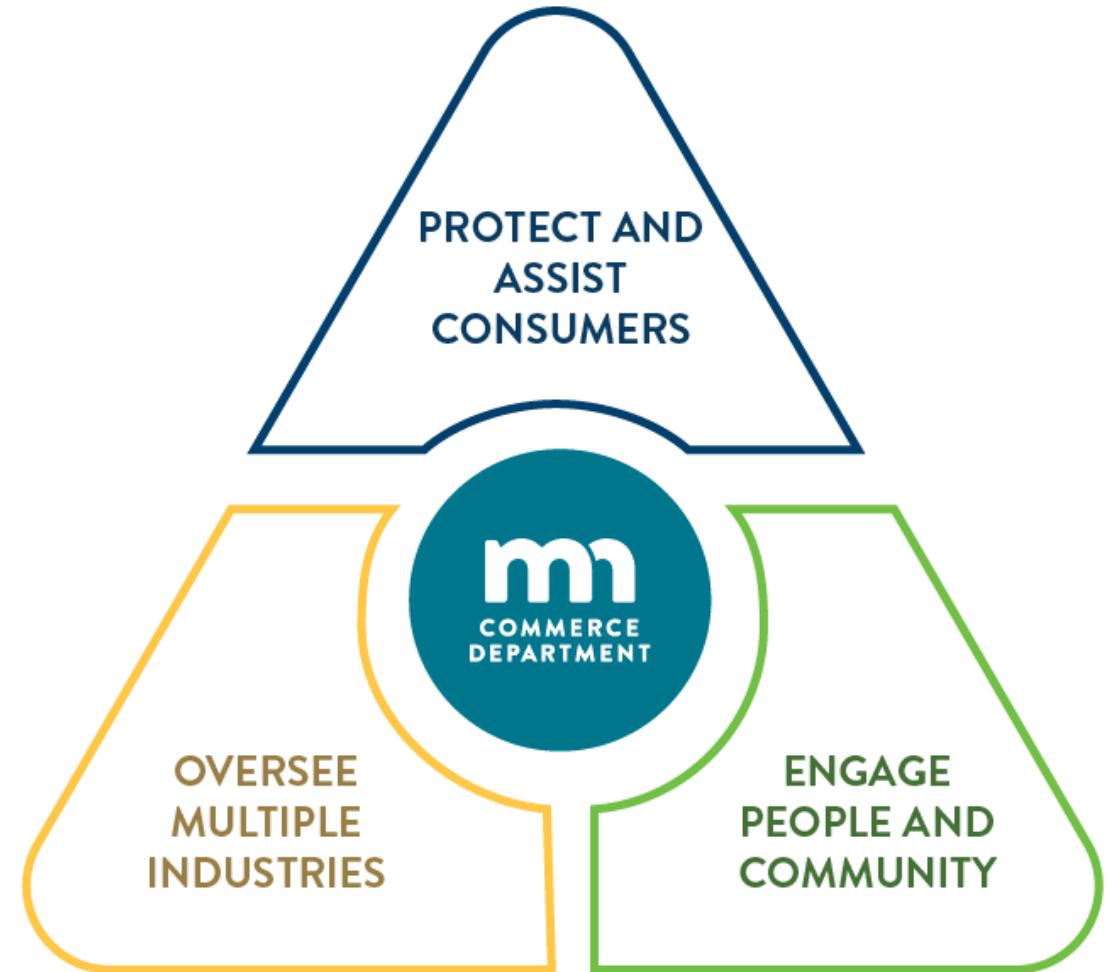
1. Overview
2. Research Study
3. Next Steps
4. Utility Affordability Programs



Overview: Commerce Mission

Mission

- Protect and assist consumers
- Oversight: 40+ industry areas
- Engagement with all communities



Overview: Commerce Energy Division

Promote clean, reliable, and affordable energy for all Minnesotans

Energy Affordability

- Home Energy Improvements
- Energy Bill Assistance

Energy Development

- Funding & Financing
- Technical Assistance
- Environmental Review

Regulatory Analysis

- Regulated Utilities
- Telecommunications

Energy Reliability

- System Reliability Planning
- Risk Monitoring and Response

Overview: Energy Assistance Program

Energy Assistance Program (EAP)

- Helps 125,000+ Minnesota households maintain safe, affordable, and continuous home energy each year
- \$115M+ funding annually
- Contracted Wilder Research to evaluate barriers to access
- Report completed in June 2022



m Minnesota Department of Commerce
Sponsored

EAP (Energy Assistance Program) is a free grant program to help families with their energy bills.

Get up to \$1600 toward your heating bills.



m COMMERCE DEPARTMENT

WWW.MNEAP.GOV

Get Help Before You Fall Behind!
See if you qualify.

[Learn More](#)

Research Methods

- Literature review
- Interviews with EAP service providers (n=13)
- Mailed survey (n=800)
- Interviews with community members
 - Individuals currently participating in EAP (n=23)
 - Individuals who are eligible for EAP, but who are not currently participating (n=22)



Wilder Research: Findings

Three key barriers

- Difficulty reaching key demographics and communities
- Disinformation about programming
- Challenges accessing or completing the application



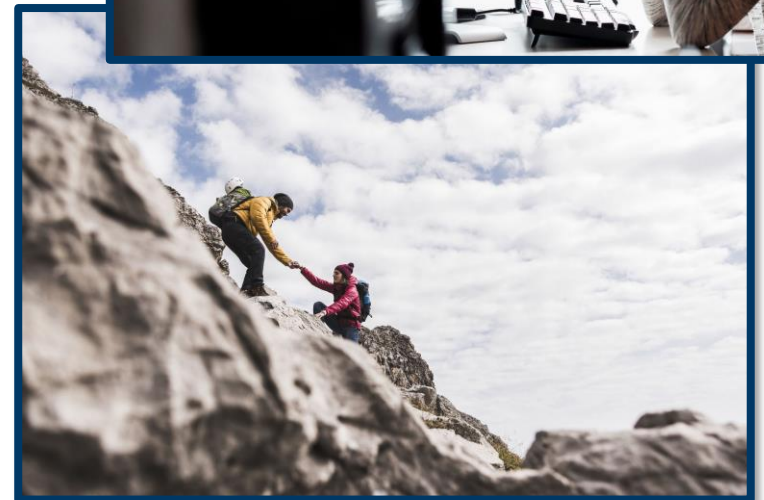
Findings

- Significant need for program
- Wide range of outreach needed to increase awareness
- Successful implementation includes multi-faceted outreach
- Households in crisis struggle to complete application
- Simplify and streamline application process
- Use data to monitor program outreach and participation

Wilder Research: Findings

Findings

- One in five respondents indicated inability to pay energy bill
- Half not enrolled in EAP said energy bills not manageable all the time
- Those currently enrolled say EAP
 - Helps them afford other household needs
 - Relieves financial stress
 - Allows them to stay in current home



Wilder Research: Findings

“Definitely stress levels are down because we're not getting disconnection notices. I'm not having to sit there and worry if I'm going to have heat in my house or not.”

(Enrolled interview participant)

*“Well, if it wasn't for energy assistance, we would be behind all of our bills. I mean, they really help with our heat and our power. Our power bill is really outrageous. We have a super tiny little house and it shouldn't be as high as it is, but for some reason it is. **And I know before we got energy assistance, we were struggling, we were always behind, we were always getting disconnection notices and we haven't had that problem since getting on energy assistance.**”* (Enrolled interview participant)

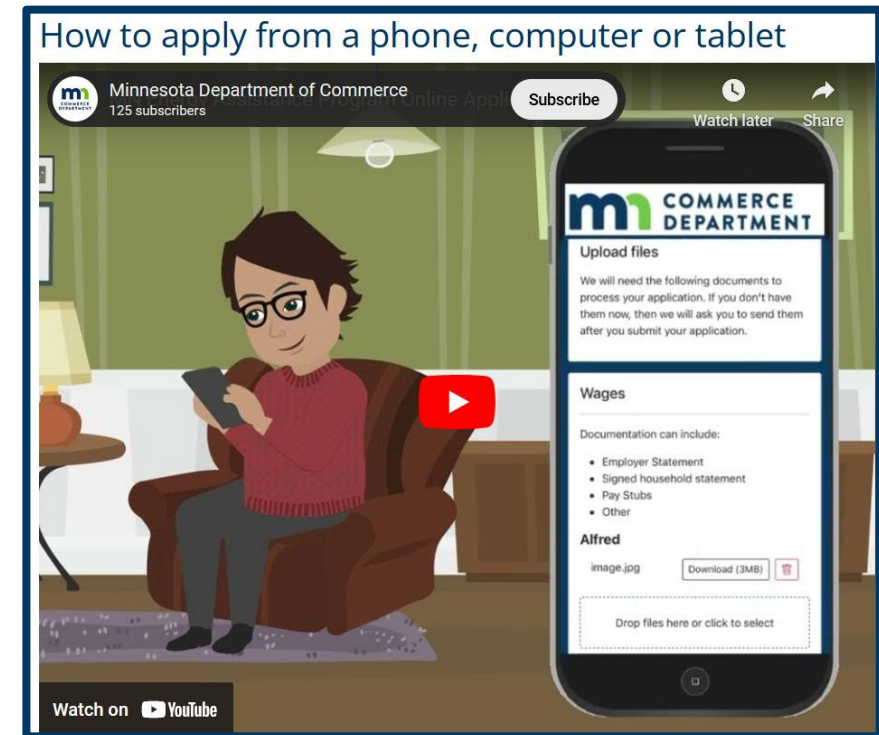
Recommendations

- Strengthen community partnerships
- Support service providers
- Streamline the application process



Streamline the application process

- Online application
- Direct identity and income verification
- Adjust income requirements
 - Allowable documentation
 - # of months of income counted
- Improve allowable forms & ways to submit
- Application support materials – leverage the web, videos, etc.



Application is simple, but documentation is not

- Clarify needed documentation
- Offer multiple methods to provide it
- Adapt to changing documentation types
- Language clarity
- Non-English-speaking households



Utility Affordability Programs

Overview

- Regulated natural gas utilities required to offer affordability program
- Largest regulated electric utility required to offer affordability program
- During pandemic, MN PUC required remaining electric utilities to propose affordability program
- Affordability programs tied to LIHEAP participation
- Arrearage forgiveness
- Percentage of income payment plan

Utility Affordability Programs

Affordability program changes

- Commission ordered utilities to ramp up outreach
- Two utilities implementing auto-enrollment
- One utility increased discount amount, extended discounts to non-LIHEAP low-income customers

Resources

- [Wilder Evaluation Report](#)
- [EAP Dashboard](#)
- [Low Income Electric Rate Discount Statute](#)
- [Low Income Natural Gas Affordability Program Statute](#)

Thank You!

Tracy M.B. Smetana

Tracy.M.B.Smetana@state.mn.us

<https://mn.gov/commerce/energy/>