

## Council Meeting Staff Report

October 16, 2019

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<b>Agenda No.:</b>	6.C
<b>Indexes (Council Goals):</b>	*2019 Council Goal - Supporting Social Services Improvement
<b>Presenters:</b>	Bob Westervelt
<b>Legislative File:</b>	12282-19

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### Title

**Modification of Department of Public Utilities Rules & Regulations - Rule GR-18 Utilities Assistance Program (UAP)**

### Recommended Action

**I move the Board of Public Utilities approve revisions to Department of Public Utilities Rules & Regulations, Rule GR-18, Utilities Assistance Program, as presented.**

### Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends approval as presented.

### Body

As Utilities costs increase, the burden on lower income households becomes increasingly difficult to manage. The “energy assistance program” was originally intended to provide heating assistance to low income customers through the winter months. In 2015 the program was expanded to provide year around assistance to Senior Citizens, to add water to eligible services, and one-time assistance to households demonstrating unusual and unanticipated hardship. Accordingly, the program was renamed the “Utilities Assistance Program”. While the revised criteria addresses probably the most critical needs, staff believes there is still room in the program and needs in the community for some broader assistance. The Utilities Board and the County Council have also expressed a desire to assess the practicality of expanding the Utilities Assistance Program (UAP). The UAP is funded entirely through voluntary contributions from customers. Funding has been relatively static for several years. The fund has a significant balance, but current contributions roughly equal current assistance payments, so any expansion of the program would diminish the balance in the fund unless additional contributions are collected. We do live in a generous community. It is staff’s opinion that with minimal publicity about the program and the need, additional contributions sufficient to fund the proposed changes would be available.

Under the current rule, assistance is provided to qualifying customers from October 1 thru March 31, or year around for qualified low-income households. Applicants must submit a completed application with proof of all household income. If the application is approved, the customer will receive credit on their bill as governed by our rules and regulations. Three changes to the rule are proposed that if approved will be implemented as funds allow.

1. In addition to qualified senior citizens, year-round assistance would be available for account holders qualified through the Social Security Administration as disabled and eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

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2. Instead of using the median household income for the Santa Fe Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as a benchmark, median household income for the Los Alamos Census Designated Place (CDP) is proposed as a benchmark. This is a relatively new standard demographic data point now readily available, and being somewhat higher would potentially allow more applicants to receive assistance
  3. Assistance will be provided for the billed electric, gas, water and sewer portions of the bill. Currently we only aid with the electric, gas and water portions of the bill. Minimum assistance for any eligible customer would remain \$15.00 per month.

As of June 30, 2019 the UAP fund had a balance of \$23,821.73. A schedule of past program activity (FY16 to FY18) is attached as Exhibit B.

### **Alternatives**

If the proposed changes are not approved, the UAP would continue under existing parameters.

### **Fiscal and Staff Impact**

No fiscal impact as the program is funded entirely through voluntary contributions from customers. Staff impact is minimal as the actual administration of the program will remain like it is now, just with some additional flexibility in granting assistance.

### **Attachments**

- A- Rule GR18 Utilities Assistance Program Proposed Revisions 10-16-19
- B- UAP Fund Program Activity