**Affordability Program Advisory Committee**

**October 5, 2016**

**Meeting Notes**

**In attendance:**

Josie Pickens, CLS

Rob Ballenger, CLS

Donna Henry, Southwest CDC

Aleta Rogers, ECA

Mariana Chilton, Drexel University, Center for Hunger-Free Communities

John Rowe, UESF

Melody Wright, PWD

Henrietta Locklear, RFC (via phone)

Joanne Dahme, PWD

Today’s meeting served as the kick off of the Affordability Program Advisory Committee. Committee members will assist with outreach and engagement by offering their input and expertise on all facets on Affordability Program communications (when they are available) and via partnering with focus groups and public meetings. Today we talked about three items.

Focus Groups/Workshops

In addition to client based focus groups, the committee recommended that the PWD work with the intake staff/counselors at ECA, UESF, NECs, and other intake centers that work with low income customers to obtain income related benefits and services. Intake staff can speak on behalf of their clients. In addition, prior to program launch, these staffs should be trained on the applications and programs as they will be assisting clients with making applications to the Affordability Program. This should occur approximately one month prior to program launch.

Immediate next steps:

* PWD to host focus group at ECA for NEC managers on the draft application. Meeting is scheduled for Thursday October 13at ECA from 10 am to noon. (Aleta Rogers)
* UESF will work with other stakeholders to assist with bringing organization clients together during the weeks of October 10 and October 16 form focus groups on the draft application. Goal will be to obtain approximately 10-15 people for each focus group with a target of achieving 5 or so focus groups in this two week period. UESF and SW CDC offered to host. (John Rowe)
* Future focus group or presentations can take advantage of our stakeholder’s calendars when workshops/presentations with clients are already planned.

Draft Application Feedback

* Application period – 14 day window is very short. Customers may need more time gathering documentation
* Applications – can they be downloaded and filled in by customers when they are ready, i.e., an application is downloaded and filled in three weeks later
* Applications – can our partner organizations download applications to have copies available to assist clients when they visit their offices? The NECs, UESF and other organizations have clients drop in all of the time to ask for assistance with filling out applications. (PECO and PGW allow this). Other offices that could provide and assist with applications include County Assistance Offices, BenePhilly Centers, OPA (anywhere that low incomes customers go for assistance with obtaining benefits)
* Applications – a kiosk/computer station in the concourse of MSB and WRB satellite offices would be helpful for clients that do not have home computers
* Hardship claims – concerns about documentation particularly around domestic abuse. Will WRB accept letters from caseworks, etc. in the absence of a protection from abuse order?
* Benefit start date – does the program discount begin with the date of the application or when the application is accepted? Committee suggests the date of the application as applications may become backlogged.
* E-collect – concern about the cascading effect as many customers may not have the funds in their bank accounts or simply not have bank accounts. Many of the clients serviced by our partners pay via check cashing agencies.
* Child support and alimony – situations are often precarious. Uncooperative spouses will not provide documentation that these payments are being made – and often are not being made
* Attachment B – many concerns about the questions and what a positive response may mean. Does a “yes” disqualify customers from the program? Comparisons were made to the state’s attempt to deny food stamps to customers that had $5,000 in assets, e.g., a car.

Communications

* Do paid advertising in local papers, e.g., SW Globe Times
* Do advertise on SEPTA buses, bus shelters, etc. UESF spent $30,000 on a SEPTA advertising campaign with very good results
* Info on Affordability Program needs to be on the “pay online” site and all areas where customers pay their bills