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# **FOCUS GROUPS WITH PIPP PARTICIPANTS**

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**Prepared for**  
**Office of Community Services, Ohio Department of Development**  
**and**  
**Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy**

**By Triad Research Group**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

The focus group report presents the findings from six (6) focus groups with Ohio residents who are currently enrolled in the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP). Three (3) focus groups were held with PIPP participants who have paid their bills and who have not been disconnected (“Pay” groups), and 3 focus groups were held with PIPP participants who at some recent point did not pay their bills and who were disconnected or who had received disconnection notices (“Not-Pay” groups). The focus groups were conducted by Triad Research Group on behalf of the Ohio Department of Development’s Office of Community Services and Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy.

The purpose of the focus groups was to understand PIPP participants’ perceptions about the PIPP, HEAP, E-HEAP and Weatherization programs. Participants’ bill-paying behaviors were also explored in depth, as were ideas for changes in the program.

Two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Lorain County on May 12, 2005; two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Washington County on May 17, 2005; and two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Franklin County on May 18, 2005.

## GENERAL PERCEPTIONS ABOUT HEAT AND ELECTRICITY

### Top-of-the-Mind Perceptions

Two top-of-the-mind perceptions consistently emerged in all six groups when asked what they think of when they hear “heat” or “electricity: *“Absolutely necessary” and “Hard to pay for.”*

### Paying Heat and Electricity Bills

Almost everyone in all six groups agreed it’s harder to pay their heat and electricity bills than it was a few years ago. They consistently gave two reasons in support of this perception: 1) Energy costs *“keep increasing”* and 2) Their income is not adequate, and it’s not increasing.

All participants agreed that the energy assistance programs *“really help,”* but they also agreed they nonetheless *“can barely keep up with my bills.”* One of the major difficulties participants consistently talked from the outset of each group was their electricity bills in the summer.

Just about all of the participants agreed that energy costs have a lot of impact on their household budget. Participants in all six groups agreed they’re making trade-offs in order to pay their energy bills, even though they participate in PIPP.

Very early in all six of the groups participants brought up the topic of arrearages. It quickly became apparent that many, and perhaps most, participants do not fully understand the

arrearages and arrearage crediting and repayment programs.<sup>1</sup> A noticeable number of participants indicated that arrearages are an *“incentive”* to remain on PIPP, because *“I’ve got no way of paying that off.”*

Some participants, primarily in the Not-Pay groups, said they (or people they know) let their gas get turned off in the summer in order to reduce the number of payments they have to make.

However, none of the participants in the six groups said they deliberately allow their electricity to be turned off, because *“you really cannot do that. You have to have it for your furnace and for the air in the summer....And of course your refrigerator.”* A noticeable number of participants also said they or family members have *“breathing problems,”* and/or they *“can’t do without air conditioning.”*

During the course of the discussions, numerous participants volunteered their perception that their gas and electric meters aren’t read correctly, and/or that the estimates are *“way, way, way off.”*

Some suggestions were offered (primarily in the Pay groups) to help people pay their heat and electricity bills: *“Always pay your bills first”*; *“Know how you’re spending your money”*; *“Try to conserve on heat and electricity usage”*; *“Make sure they’re not over-charging you”*; and *“Make sure you know about every source of help.”*

Participants generally agreed that *“most people try to pay their bills,”* but they don’t succeed at times because: *“They’re always robbing Peter to pay Paul”*; they have other, *“even more”* pressing bills; and, they have to cover *“an emergency.”* Participants also agreed that some people are *“just plain irresponsible.”*

## **GENERAL PERCEPTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

Just about all participants said they had first heard about the energy assistance program from one of four sources: 1) A human or social services agency (their Community Action Agency was most frequently mentioned); 2) *“Word of mouth”*; 3) A utility company, when they were about to be, or had been, disconnected; and/or 4) Their church (mentioned primarily in Washington County).

Participants agreed that when they first heard about the energy assistance program they were *“so relieved.”* Everyone appeared to agree that they didn’t have any reservations about signing up for the program.

Participants said they’d originally gone to their Community Action Agency (CAA) to sign up for the energy assistance program. Perceptions about their CAA varied. Some participants described staff at the CAAs as *“helpful”* and *“nice.”* Other participants described CAA staff as

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<sup>1</sup> Arrearage crediting programs are available to participants while they are on PIPP and generally reduce the amount of arrearages when clients meet payment requirements. Arrearage repayment programs are available after a person is no longer income eligible for PIPP.

*“rude.”* Just about everyone agreed that CAA staff has *“more to do than they can handle.”* Participants’ two greatest complaints about the CAAs were that *“you have to wait and wait and wait, and then sometimes they don’t take you anyway”*; and *“If you miss one tiny little thing, you have to leave and then you start all over again.”*

Participants tended to agree on the questions they had when they first heard about the energy assistance program: How much will my bill be? How much will they help me? Am I eligible? How long is the program going to last? Does this mean my gas/electricity won’t get shut off? What type of information about myself do I need to provide in order to sign up?

Participants said the program was explained *“pretty well”* to them by CAA staff (although it was evident from the discussions that numerous participants had at least a few misunderstandings about PIPP arrearages).

Many participants spontaneously mentioned their concern that the energy assistance program might be eliminated because *“everything’s getting cut these days.”*

## **PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SPECIFIC ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

### **PIPP**

Most participants said they have a *“pretty good”* understanding about how the PIPP program works, although as previously stated, it was evident that quite a few do not understand arrearages. Additionally, participants offered differing descriptions about how the program works.

Not surprisingly, participants said that what they like about PIPP is that *“it helps me pay my bills,”* and *“it’s steady.”* However, participants consistently identified a few perceived problems with PIPP: It’s *“only for gas”*; Arrearages should be better explained (e.g., how arrearages accumulate, when arrearages have to be paid, what happens if you have to move, are there ways to get help paying off arrearages); You don’t know how you’ll *“ever pay it [the arrearages] off”*; You have to catch up with the entire gas arrearage bill each summer (a common perception, particularly in the Pay groups, but mentioned in the Not-Pay groups as well); and *“They don’t warn you about what month you have to go and re-apply”* (Lorain County groups only).

Pay participants generally agreed that their PIPP payment is reasonable. However, quite a few Not-Pay participants said they don’t think their PIPP payment is reasonable.

When asked what could be done to make paying their energy bills easier, participants suggested: Have the same program for electricity; Explain arrearages better (see above); Encourage the utility companies to make it easier to change when the bill is due.

Some participants, particularly in the Not-Pay groups, said they or people they know have had to move because they can’t pay their utility bill(s). They said what people *“usually”* do to avoid unpaid utility bills is *“put it in somebody else’s name.”*

As previously stated, many participants in the six groups expressed their concern about arrearages. However, a difference between the Pay and Not-Pay groups was that many of the

Pay participants talked about what they might do to eliminate their arrearage. Not-Pay participants tended to focus on their perception that *“I’ll never find a way to pay that.”*

Two different arrearage crediting plans and a generic arrearage repayment program were described to participants. Participants’ reactions to hearing about the arrearage crediting programs were fairly consistent: Almost no one in any of the six groups knew there are arrearage crediting and repayment programs; Participants were very relieved to learn that these arrearage crediting and repayment programs exist; They liked the three-year “forgiveness” program, but they didn’t think it was possible for them to pay 36 bills in a row on time and in full. In fact, they didn’t think they could pay a year’s bills on time and in full; The Dayton program appealed to them most because if they *“messed up”* one month, they aren’t *“kicked out of the program.”*; The primary reaction (particularly in the Not-Pay groups) to the generic repayment program which requires a maximum-\$20-per-month-extra plan was that they aren’t likely to *“ever get off PIPP”* because of their low income. However, they agreed it might work for those who do get off PIPP if they know about this program; they thought these programs, particularly the Dayton program, would serve as an incentive for people to try to pay their bills on time and in full; and, they said they also need help with their electricity bills.

## **HEAP**

Participants said they generally understand HEAP, but when asked to explain it, it was evident that their understanding was spotty, because different descriptions of HEAP were offered.

Participants said they like HEAP because *“it helps with the bill,”* and it *“helps you not get so far in debt.”* Some perceived HEAP problems identified by participants were: There’s no help with summer electricity bills; the one-time payment doesn’t always show up on the bill (Columbus Pay group only); and *“It’s too hard to qualify for it.”*

Participants tended to agree that *“some people abuse this program.”* But they also agreed that *“most”* people are not abusing the program.

## **E-HEAP**

Very few participants in the three Pay groups knew much, if anything, about E-HEAP. Participants in the Not-Pay groups were much better acquainted with E-HEAP, and all of them had received E-HEAP funds. One concern that was mentioned by some Not-Pay participants about the E-HEAP program is *“you have to wait for a shut-off notice before they’ll help you....”*

## **Weatherization Program**

Most participants had at least some knowledge of the Weatherization program, and they tended to view the program favorably. However, very few had benefited from the Weatherization program for one of two reasons: 1) They’d applied for the program, but they’d *“never heard back from anyone”*; or 2) their landlord wouldn’t agree to participating.

## **REACTIONS TO IDEAS FOR CHANGES IN THE PROGRAM**

### **Budget Education Class**

Most Pay participants said it would “*probably*” be a good idea to offer a budget education class to people before they went on the PIPP program. Most Not-Pay participants tended to rate this idea as only “*so-so.*” Participants in all of the groups tended to agree the budget education class should not be mandatory. For many this was because most people are in “*emergency situations*” and “*can’t wait to take a class in order to get help.*” Quite a few people observed that “*budget education classes aren’t going to help if you don’t have the money in the first place.*”

### **Lower Winter/Higher Summer Natural Gas Payments**

Most participants did not react favorably to the idea of lowering PIPP gas payments in the winter (for example to 5%), but increasing PIPP gas payments in the summer months. Their primary objection was that their electricity costs are so high in the summer, they don’t have extra money then, either.

### **Minimum PIPP Payment for Everyone**

Many participants agreed that “*everybody should pay something,*” the example being \$5 to \$10 per month. However, some people in both the Washington County Pay and Not-Pay groups said, “*If you’re that bad off, maybe you shouldn’t have to pay anything...at least for a while.*”

### **Special Program for the Elderly and Disabled**

Just about all participants in both types of Franklin and Washington County groups and the Lorain County Pay group agreed that that there should be a special program for the elderly and disabled. The examples given to them were no arrearages or a lower payment requirement for the elderly and disabled. However, many participants in the Lorain County Not-Pay group were not as receptive to the idea as participants in the other five groups had been.

### **Making PIPP the Same for Gas and Electric**

Participants agreed that the PIPP program should be the same for gas and electricity. When it was suggested to them, participants liked the idea of averaging their electric costs across 12 months, because “*then you know what to budget for.*” However, they expressed some distrust about how “*that average would be arrived at.*” This distrust appeared to be based on their perceptions about current estimated bills (by the gas and electric companies) being incorrect.

### **Emergency Summer Cooling Program**

Participants strongly agreed there should be an emergency summer cooling program for people with breathing difficulties and families with small children so they don't get disconnected.

### **Reward for On-Time Payments**

Participants liked the idea of getting a reward for on-time payments. (Examples of rewards they might receive were an extra HEAP benefit that could be applied to their bill or the elimination of a portion of their arrearages.) Participants agreed a reward would provide incentive for making on-time payments.

### **Sanctions for Late PIPP Payments**

Most participants said they didn't "*see the sense*" in a sanction for failing to make PIPP payments (e.g., a co-payment in order to receive E-HEAP funds).

### **Making E-Heap Available in August**

Most participants did not think this would be particularly helpful, because it's later in the year "*when I get into trouble and I need the help.*" Quite a few participants said it would be "*most helpful*" if they were able to get E-HEAP twice a year, with the summer payment (E-HEAP and/or HEAP) going toward the electric bill.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The following report presents the findings from six (6) focus groups with Ohio residents who are currently enrolled in the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP). Three (3) focus groups were held with PIPP participants who have paid their bills and who have not been disconnected (“Pay” groups), and 3 focus groups were held with PIPP participants who at some recent point did not pay their bills and who were disconnected or who had received disconnection notices (“Not-Pay” groups). The focus groups were conducted by Triad Research Group on behalf of the Ohio Department of Development’s Office of Community Services and Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy.

The purpose of the focus groups was to understand PIPP participants’ perceptions about the PIPP, HEAP, E-HEAP and Weatherization programs. Participants’ bill-paying behaviors were also explored in depth, as were ideas for changes to the program.

Two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Lorain County on May 12, 2005; two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Washington County on May 17, 2005; and two focus groups (one Pay and one Not-Pay) were held in Franklin County on May 18, 2005. These three counties (Lorain, Washington and Franklin) were selected because this allowed Triad Research Group to obtain a reasonably good cross section of Ohio’s population density and diversity. Lorain County is medium-sized urban, northeast, declining industrial; Washington County is small city-rural, southeast river community, stable; and, Franklin County is large, urban, central, growing. Two types of groups (Pay and Not-Pay) were held in each county to see if there are any discernible differences between these two types of groups that might explain their bill paying behaviors.

Findings were quite similar across groups and across counties. Therefore, findings are not attributed to type of group or county unless one type of group or residents of a particular county voiced different perceptions from the other groups.

All focus groups were moderated by Phyllis Dykes, Senior Consultant, Triad Research Group.

## II. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS ABOUT HEAT AND ELECTRICITY

### ***TOP-OF-THE-MIND PERCEPTIONS***

Prior to any discussion, participants were asked to write down the first words or phrases that come to mind when they hear “heat” or “electricity. **Two top-of-the-mind perceptions consistently emerged in all six groups:**

*“Absolutely necessary” -- “An unavoidable expense.” -- “You’ve got to have them.” -- “So important.”*

*“Hard to pay for” -- “The high bills make me scared.” -- “Horribly expensive.” -- “It makes me angry that it’s so expensive. It’s terrible....” -- “Thank God for the help we can get when it’s necessary.”*

### ***PAYING HEAT AND ELECTRICITY BILLS***

Almost everyone in all six groups agreed it’s **harder** to pay their heat and electricity bills than it was a few years ago. They consistently gave two reasons in support of this perception:

**Energy costs “keep increasing”** -- *“...The price of gas keeps going up and up....” -- “Everything’s going up.” -- “There’s been increases in the electric bills, phone bills, all the bills, really.” -- “...You’re spending more money each year to pay the bill....” -- “Everything’s going up. You choose between your gas bill or your electric bill or your grocery bill, rent, gas for your car. The whole economy is really taking a bad turn on us.”*

**Their income is not adequate, and it’s not increasing** -- *“Rates keep going up, but my income’s sure not going up.” -- “Low-paying jobs.” -- “The elderly and children are what I worry about, because most elderly people are going to keep the heat down because they’re very concerned about the cost....They’re on a fixed income, and it’s like my God, you’ve got to freeze to death!....” -- “If you’re disabled, or elderly, or a single Mom, how are you supposed to pay these outrageous bills? You’ve got rent, food, whatever....”*

**All participants agreed that the energy assistance programs “really help,” but they also agreed they nonetheless “can barely keep up with my bills.”** -- *“I don’t know what I’d do without this heat program....”* -- *“Thank God for small favors.”* -- *“...If it wasn’t for some of the agencies, I wouldn’t make it...Thank God they’re there.”*

**One of the major difficulties participants consistently talked from the outset of each group was their electricity bills in the summer.** -- *“During the summer, electricity, they make you pay the whole amount, instead of the [PIPP] percentage, and that’s what makes it harder.”* -- *“I’m in public housing, so I have to maintain lights and gas all year round. In the summertime, the PIPP program, they don’t pay for it. So by the end of the year, I really need help.”* -- *“When you live on a fixed income, which is what I live on, it’s hard when you get an electric bill in the summertime that’s \$400-and-some and you only get \$500-and-some [income]....And I’m on a breathing machine. What do I do?”*

**Even though they participate in PIPP, just about all of the participants agreed that energy costs have a lot of impact on their household budget.** -- *“Except for my rent, that’s my biggest payment.”* -- *“It’s my hardest bill....”* -- *“You can’t fake it out....You pay it or they turn you off....”* -- *“In the summer months, you don’t know how much your bill is going to be...so it’s hard to plan....”* -- *“If you’ve got kids like I do, in the wintertime you’ve got to make sure the kids stay warm. You put three or four blankets on the bed...but you have to keep the gas up just to keep your kids from getting sick.”* -- *“I had breast cancer, and I had to go through surgery and everything. Then they tell you, ‘Don’t catch a cold.’ But on the other hand, you’re trying to keep your heat at a certain level and doubling up on the covers and everything....But it’s not enough. It’s not being warm vs. not going to the hospital, and if you don’t have any [health] insurance, what can you do? It’s like a no-win situation.”* -- *“You’re getting minimum wage. Your rent’s \$300. Then there’s your food and your utilities....”*

**Participants in all six groups agreed they’re making trade-offs in order to pay their energy bills.** -- *“My whole life is robbing Peter to pay Paul.”* -- *“You don’t pay one bill so you can pay another bill.”* -- *“I’ve gotten to the point where I’m sacrificing food...It’s down to the level of survival....”* -- *“I can’t afford any kind of pleasure thing....”* -- *“One time I had to sell my end tables...and another time my son’s computer.”* -- *“I try not to use my lights. Maybe the TV and if I go to the bathroom....25 watts in the kitchen....”*-- *“My kids need things, but the bills have to come first....Before shoes, coats, anything else....”* -- *“Pay half this month, half next*

month....” -- “I just do without a lot.” -- “People go without eating sometimes....Or they try to find whatever free food handouts they can get.”

**Very early in all six of the groups participants brought up the topic of arrearages. It quickly became apparent that many, and perhaps most, participants do not fully understand the arrearages and the arrearage crediting and repayment programs.** For example, a surprisingly large number of participants, particularly in the Pay groups (but in the Non-Pay groups as well), were under the impression that they “*must*” pay off their entire arrearage bill for heat each summer. -- “*You still have to pay it off...in the summer...or you will be disconnected.*” -- “*I’m paying off all through the summer what I didn’t pay in the winter....*” -- “*I paid them \$800, and it still didn’t catch me up....*” Quite a few participants talked about being “*afraid to move, because I don’t know if I have to pay that arrearage off first.*” -- “*...I don’t know what happens to that arrearage, because mine’s gone to probably \$1200....Will I be able to get gas hooked up at another location without paying that off?*” Some participants, particularly in the Columbus Not-Pay group, said that having arrearages negatively affects their credit. -- “*Columbia Gas puts it on your credit report. That \$3,000 is on my credit report.*” -- “*They pull your credit report, and they say, “Oh, we can’t give a loan to this person because this person owes almost \$2,000.’*”

**A noticeable number of participants indicated that arrearages are an “*incentive*” to remain on PIPP, because “*I’ve got no way of paying that off.*”** While this perception was mentioned in the Pay groups, it was a major topic of conversation in the Not-Pay groups. -- “*If you get off that program....you have to pay it immediately or you get cut off....Now where am I going to get that kind of money?*” -- “*...If you cannot pay that [arrearages] bill, they’re going to cut you off. You can’t get it back on in your name....*” -- “*...You have no choice if you do not have enough money to get off of it....*” -- “*I’ll never get that paid off. Never.*”

**Some participants, primarily in the Not-Pay groups, said they (or people they know) let their gas get turned off in the summer in order to reduce the number of payments they have to make.** -- “*...And I’m boiling pots of water for a bath and thinking, ‘Why did I do this?’*” -- “*I know people that do that.*” -- “*I guess they figure in the middle of July you can take a cold shower.*” -- “*I do it all the time....I pay it off, and then I get it turned off....*”

However, none of the participants in the six groups said they deliberately allow their electricity to be turned off, because *“you really cannot do that. You have to have it for your furnace and for the air in the summer....And of course your refrigerator.”* A noticeable number of participants also said they or family members have *“breathing problems,”* and/or they *“can’t do without air conditioning.”* -- *“...I’m extremely miserable if it goes up over 75 outside, and yet in the last couple of years, I wait until I’m almost dripping, and then I cut the air on. Or I bring the fans out...trying to keep it [electricity usage] as low as I can...”* -- *“Not for me. I have a breathing machine.”*

During the course of the discussions, numerous participants volunteered their perception that their gas and electric meters aren’t read correctly, and/or that the estimates are *“way, way, way off.”* -- *“When they come out to read the meters, if I’m not home to write down what my meter says...they write an estimate of how much they think I will spend. Then when I call in, he’ll tell me, ‘Oh, we overcharged you by \$100.’ Well, a hundred dollars!....”*

Some suggestions were offered (primarily in the Pay groups) to help people pay their heat and electricity bills:

*“Always pay your bills first”* [before making other types of expenditures] -- *“...I know people that’ll buy other stuff before they pay their bills...‘Oh, I’m going to get my hair done’....”* -- *“Utilities have to be a first priority.”* -- *“...I’ll do without something just to make sure that that is paid, so I know my electric and my gas isn’t going to be shut off....”* -- *“I give priority to those bills.”*

**Know how you’re spending your money** -- *“I know exactly where my money is every week....”* -- *“You have to have a budget for each week...or each day, if that’s how bad it is....”*

**Try to conserve on heat and electricity usage** -- *“...Don’t over-use it....”*

**“Make sure they’re not over-charging you”** -- *“They do that, like when you get those estimates....”*

***“Make sure you know about every source of help”*** -- *“There’s a book in the library on resources that’ll help you with everything.”* -- *“I keep a notebook of where I’ve gotten help in the past....”*

Participants generally agreed that ***“most people try to pay their bills,”*** but they don’t succeed at times because:

***“They’re always robbing Peter to pay Paul”*** -- *“It really is hard for some people....They’re lucky if they’ve got enough to feed their kids....”*

**They have other, “even more” pressing bills** -- *“...I got to pay my medicine.”* -- *“Your child needs something....Sometimes I let one bill go because she needs something for school.”* -- *“I’m a diabetic....Do I pay my electric bill or get the medicine that’s keeping me alive?...”*

**They have to cover “an emergency”** -- *“The car.”* -- *“You or your kids get sick....”*

Participants also agreed that some people are ***“just plain irresponsible.”*** -- *“I know people that just quit paying their bill....Then they go to Community Action to get bailed out....”*

### III. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Just about all participants said they had first heard about the energy assistance program from one of four sources:

- 1) **A human or social services agency** (their Community Action Agency was most frequently mentioned)
- 2) ***“Word of mouth”***
- 3) **A utility company, when they were about to be, or had been, disconnected and/or**
- 4) **Their church** (mentioned primarily in Washington County)

Participants agreed that when they first heard about the energy assistance program they were ***“so relieved.”*** Everyone appeared to agree that they didn't have any reservations about signing up for the program. -- *“I thought, ‘Thank God.’ ”* -- *“I was so happy.”* -- *“I breathed such a sigh of relief....”* -- *“Somebody tells you, ‘Oh, we got help for you,’ you're going to jump on it with no worries.”* -- *“You need that help, and you'll do just about anything to get it.”* -- *“I thought it was great.”* -- *“I needed the help so bad, I wasn't about to ask any questions.”*

Participants said they'd originally gone to their Community Action Agency (CAA) to sign up for the energy assistance program. Perceptions about their CAA varied. Some participants described staff at the CAAs as ***“helpful”*** and ***“nice.”*** -- *“They were very helpful to me.”* -- *“I've been treated fairly decent....”* -- *“It was very easy.”* -- *“I've always had good experiences....They also gave me [telephone] numbers and such. Like they gave me a church...that helped me a lot....”* Other participants described CAA staff as ***“rude.”*** -- *“...Sometimes they act like you're a big pain, and that gets to me.”*

**Just about everyone agreed that CAA staff has “more to do than they can handle.”** -- “They need help there.” -- “I think they’re overworked. When you go in there there’s usually only one woman doing the whole thing, and she’s got 15, 20 people [waiting] there....” Participants’ two greatest complaints about the CAAs were that “you have to wait and wait and wait, and then sometimes they don’t take you anyway”; and “If you miss one tiny little thing, you have to leave and then you start all over again.” -- “You have to wait in line with like a hundred people. And you stand there for four hours waiting, and then when it’s your turn, if you’ve missed one little thing, that’s it. You have to go back and start all over again.”

**Participants tended to agree on the questions they had when they first heard about the energy assistance program:**

- ? How much will my bill be?
- ? How much will they help me?
- ? Am I eligible?
- ? How long is the program going to last?
- ? Does this mean my gas/electricity won't get shut off?
- ? What type of information about myself do I need to provide in order to sign up?

**Participants said the program was explained “pretty well” to them by CAA staff (although it was evident from the discussions that numerous participants had at least a few misunderstandings about PIPP arrearages).** -- “I think they try to explain it, but some people are just sitting there not thinking about what it really means in the future. They’re just trying to get help today.”

**Many participants spontaneously mentioned their concern that the energy assistance program might be eliminated because “everything’s getting cut these days.”** -- “What would I do if the program was dissolved? I’d be in a lot of trouble. A lot of people would be in trouble.”

## IV. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SPECIFIC ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

### *PIPP*

Most participants said they have a “*pretty good*” understanding about how the PIPP program works, although as previously stated, it was evident that quite a few do not understand arrearages. Additionally, participants offered differing descriptions about how the program works.

Not surprisingly, participants said that what they like about PIPP is that “*it helps me pay my bills,*” and “*it’s steady.*” -- “*You know how much your payment is in those months.*” -- “*I know it’s going to be there.*”

However, participants consistently identified a few perceived problems with PIPP:

**It’s “only for gas”** -- “*You have to pay the really high electricity in the summer.*”

**Arrearages should be better explained** (e.g., how arrearages accumulate, when arrearages have to be paid, what happens if you have to move, are there ways to get help paying off arrearages)

**You don’t know how you’ll “ever pay it [the arrearages] off”** -- “*When that program is over with and you get that final bill, you’ve got to pay that \$500 or \$800 or \$1,400. You don’t have it.*” -- “*How many people are ever going to come up with \$2,500?*” -- “*In a way, you’re just putting a band-aid on the problem.*”

**You have to catch up with the entire gas arrearage bill each summer** (a common perception, particularly in the Pay groups, but mentioned in the Not-Pay groups as well) -- “*It’s so hard to get the gas caught up when at the same time you’re trying to keep up with the electric bills in the summer.*” -- “*As soon as PIPP is over, they send you that big bill....And you’re responsible to pay that actual balance....People don’t have that \$3,000, \$4,000....*”

**“They don’t warn you about what month you have to go and re-apply”** (Lorain County groups only)

**Pay participants generally agreed that their PIPP payment is reasonable. However, quite a few Not-Pay participants said they don't think their PIPP payment is reasonable.** -- *"I'm paying \$50-some a month [for PIPP]. I get \$500 a month. I've got to pay for rent, I got to buy food..."* -- *"They don't charge you [based] on what you use, they charge you on what you make. That doesn't make sense to me."* -- *"...Usually your payments are higher than what you can really afford. It gets frustrating sometimes."* -- *"They don't take your expenses into account....Rent, food, utilities....And they never take your car insurance into account...."*

**When asked what could be done to make paying their energy bills easier, participants suggested:**

**Have the same program for electricity** -- *"So you'd have a set amount for that, too...and know what to plan for."* -- *"Have the same program for gas and electric...."*

**Explain arrearages better** (see above)

**Encourage the utility companies to make it easier to change when the bill is due** -- *"I'm on disability, and I get my check on the 3<sup>rd</sup>....But my bill is due on the 4<sup>th</sup>....So I'm always late, because you cannot adjust it...."* -- *"I tried to get ahead one month so I wouldn't always be late...but I could never get that much money together...."*

**Some participants, particularly in the Not-Pay groups, said they or people they know have had to move because they can't pay their utility bill(s).** They said what people "usually" do to avoid unpaid utility bills is *"put it in somebody else's name."*

**As previously stated, many participants in the six groups expressed their concern about arrearages. However, a difference between the Pay and Not-Pay groups was that many of the Pay participants talked about what they might do to eliminate their arrearage. Not-Pay participants tended to focus on their perception that "I'll never find a way to pay that."** -- *"Down the road, if that PIPP runs out, what am I going to do? But I just worry about today. I'll just cross that bridge down the road, worry about that \$3,000, \$4,000 bill then."* -- *"It scares you. What if something happens and all of a sudden they say, 'Pay this now.' I couldn't possibly do that. Not now. Not ever."* -- *"It's unrealistic, because if a person's in that position, and they're in that position for more than a year....Say you got sick....All of a sudden you've lost your job, your income, your health insurance, everything. Well, you don't have any way to pay anything....So two, three years later you have this \$2,000, \$3,000 bill to pay...."*

**Two different arrearage crediting plans and a generic arrearage repayment program were described to participants** (for current PIPP customers, arrearages are “forgiven” over a period of three years if all bills are paid on time and in full; for current PIPP customers, the Dayton Power and Light/Vectren program, where on-time payments are matched; and for former PIPP customers, a third-year extra amount not to exceed \$20 per month per utility, to be paid for the same length of time the customer was on PIPP).

**Participants’ reactions to hearing about the arrearage credit programs were fairly consistent:**

**Almost no one in any of the six groups knew there are arrearage crediting and repayment programs.** -- *“Why weren’t we told about this?”* -- *“It would be good if you knew about this as you were starting the program. Then, you might not wind up with such a big debt....”*

**Participants were very relieved to learn that these arrearage crediting and repayment programs exist.**

**They liked the three-year “forgiveness” program, but they didn’t think it was possible for them to pay 36 bills in a row on time and in full. In fact, they didn’t think they could pay a year’s bills on time and in full.** Some suggested that there should be at least one “grace” payment a year where they could be late without jeopardizing their position in the arrearage credit program. -- *“It’s impractical. Twelve months is a whole year of paying on time....”* -- *“I’m always late because my check comes the day before my bill is due....”* -- *“Maybe ten months in full and on time....I could probably do that....”* -- *“...Suppose you miss it one or two times? Then you’re just out of luck.”* -- *“You don’t pay your bills on time because you don’t have the money, not because you want to be late....”* -- *“It’s good and bad. The bad part is that if you miss a payment, you have to start all over again.”* -- *“I could never do that because I get my check on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, but my bill is due on the 8<sup>th</sup>....So it’s always late.”* -- *“I think that would only work if you had a grace period each month of oh, seven to ten days. You get grace periods on everything else.”*

The Dayton program appealed to them most because if they **“messed up”** one month, they aren’t **“kicked out of the program.”** -- *“I like that one better...because if you turn around and next month you can’t do it, you get another chance the next month...”* -- *“...Everybody’s going to have be late now and again...but you aren’t penalized.”* -- *“I would benefit from it...”* -- *“That’s a whole lot better. It gives you a chance to get some of that off month per month. That’s a whole lot easier than trying to stay on track for a whole 12 months.”* -- *“Everybody has problems sometimes....This way, you’d get a little room if something goes wrong.”*

The primary reaction (particularly in the Not-Pay groups) to the generic repayment program which requires a maximum-\$20-per-month-extra plan was that they aren’t likely to **“ever get off PIPP”** because of their low income. -- *“It sounds like a fair deal, but you’d have to be making too much money to be on PIPP.”* **However, they agreed it might work for those who do get off PIPP if they know about this program.** -- *“It certainly seems like a more reasonable way than them just saying, ‘Here, you owe \$3,000. We’re going to turn you off.’ ”*

They thought these programs, particularly the Dayton program, would serve as an incentive for people to try to pay their bills on time and in full.

They said they also need help with their electricity bills -- *“But this is only for gas. It’s my electricity, too, that’s my problem.”*

## **HEAP**

Participants said they generally understand HEAP, but when asked to explain it, it was evident that their understanding was spotty, because different descriptions of HEAP were offered. As one example, in the Lorain Pay group, there was a debate over when HEAP is available during the course of the year, and precisely what it’s for.

Participants said they like HEAP because **“it helps with the bill,”** and it **“helps you not get so far in debt.”** -- *“They can help provide the assistance you need when you can’t afford to pay your whole bill.”* -- *“That month that I get it...It’s like, ‘Great, they gave me that, so now I can catch up on this bill.’ So it does help.”*

**Some perceived HEAP problems identified by participants were:**

**There's no help with summer electricity bills** -- *"It would help so much if you could get it twice a year."*

**The one-time payment doesn't always show up on the bill** (Columbus Pay group only)

***"It's too hard to qualify for it"***

**Participants tended to agree that "some people abuse this program."** -- *"There's people out there that needs it, but can't get it because you've got the ones that don't really need it pretending like they do."* **But they also agreed that "most" people are not abusing the program.** -- *"They really do need it."* Pay group participants agreed that it's "very very difficult" to distinguish between the *"the truly needy and the ones who are just irresponsible or whatever."*

## ***E-HEAP***

**Very few participants in the three Pay groups knew much, if anything, about E-HEAP. Participants in the Not-Pay groups were much better acquainted with E-HEAP, and most of them had received E-HEAP funds.**

**One concern that was mentioned by some Not-Pay participants about the E-HEAP program is "you have to wait for a shut-off notice before they'll help you...."** -- *"You can only get help if you have a shut-off notice...but if they'd give you help sooner, you wouldn't have to get to that point."*

## **WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM**

Most participants had at least some knowledge of the Weatherization program, and they tended to view the program favorably. However, very few had benefited from the Weatherization program for one of two reasons:

**They'd applied for the program, but they'd "never heard back from anyone"** -- *"I apply for it every time they send out the form, but that's as far as it goes...."* -- *"That's the main reason my gas bill is so high....It's an older house, and I rent...but I've never heard back from them...."* -- *"They've never come out and done it."*

**Their landlord wouldn't agree to participate** -- *"The landlords say no."* -- *"They don't want to pay their half."* -- *"They're not going to let one person get a new window...and everybody else in the building doesn't get a new window."*

## V. REACTIONS TO IDEAS FOR CHANGES IN THE PROGRAM

### ***BUDGET EDUCATION CLASS***

Most Pay participants said it would “*probably*” be a good idea to offer a budget education class to people before they went on the PIPP program. -- “*It would give a person a better understanding of what they’re getting into, and how to pay for it.*” Most Not-Pay participants tended to rate this idea as only “*so-so.*” -- “*People don’t want all those strings. If you want to help them, help them.*” -- “*It would be good if that were an option, and if we wanted to choose that option, fine.*” -- “*It seems to me like that’s not a very efficient use of their money. You can get educational programs [for free] if you need them....*”

However, participants in all of the groups tended to agree the budget education class should not be mandatory. For many this was because most people are in “*emergency situations*” and “*can’t wait to take a class in order to get help.*” -- “*My problem would be if it’s mandatory. If their stuff is getting ready to be turned off, they need the help now. They don’t need to wait for a program.*” -- “*If that’s the only way they can get it, they’ll go...But if they don’t want to be there...they’ll just sit there and not listen.*”

Quite a few people observed that “*budget education classes aren’t going to help if you don’t have the money in the first place.*” -- “*I think it’s unnecessary. It’s time consuming...and they would cost a lot to operate....The money could be used to help more people.*” -- “*Some people can budget very well. They don’t need a budget program....What they need is money....*”

## **LOWER WINTER/HIGHER SUMMER NATURAL GAS PAYMENTS**

Most participants did not react favorably to the idea of lowering PIPP gas payments in the winter (for example to 5%), but increasing PIPP gas payments in the summer months. Their primary objection was that their electricity costs are so high in the summer, they don't have extra money then, either. -- *"Then your gas would go up, and so does your electric....It could be worse that way."* -- *"...It just puts me in a bad place in the summertime, instead of the wintertime...."* -- *"What's the purpose of that? You're still paying the same money. And why make it higher in the summertime when you already have higher electric bills?"* -- *"You're not really giving me any relief."* One advantage to lower winter payments that some participants pointed out was *"then you'd have a little bit more at Christmas."* -- *"Maybe that way I could get my kids something extra at Christmas."*

## **MINIMUM PIPP PAYMENT FOR EVERYONE**

Many participants agreed that *"everybody should pay something,"* the example being \$5 to \$10 per month. -- *"Everybody can pay something...and they should."* -- *"They're using it. They should contribute something."* However, some people in both the Washington County Pay and Not-Pay groups said *"if you're that bad off, maybe you shouldn't have to pay anything...at least for a while"* -- *"If somebody was out of work for a while...like there's a strike, or their plant burns down...it would give them a way to know they're still going to have their electric or gas....But I don't think it would be good for the long-term."*

## **SPECIAL PROGRAM FOR THE ELDERLY AND DISABLED**

Just about all participants in both types of Franklin and Washington County groups and the Lorain County Pay group agreed that that there should be a special program for the elderly and disabled. The examples given to them were no arrearages or a lower payment requirement for the elderly and disabled. -- *"They're on such a fixed income....There's no extra, no anything for them...."* -- *"...I think it's a respect issue....They deserve more help...."* -- *"If you're disabled...you're not going to be able to pay off \$3,000 or \$4,000. You're on a fixed*

income. *It's not going to happen....*" -- *"The elderly and the disabled, they can't work....Out of respect, they shouldn't have to pay. All their life they worked, or if they're disabled, until they became disabled. I think they should get a break."* -- *"The elderly and the disabled, not many people want to hire them....And so many of them can't work anyhow...."* **However, many participants in the Lorain County Not-Pay group were not as receptive to the idea as participants in other five groups had been.** -- *"...Single Moms should get the same treatment as the disabled or the elderly. It's just as hard for a single Mother with one, two, three kids to get help as it is for the disabled and others."*

## **MAKING PIPP THE SAME FOR GAS AND ELECTRIC**

**Participants agreed that the PIPP program should be the same for gas and electricity.** -- *"Then you could have a set amount in those months when it fluctuates so much."*

**When it was suggested to them, participants liked the idea of averaging their electric costs across 12 months, because *"then you know what to budget for."*** -- *"If it's a set amount, and if it's not outrageous, then it's a good idea. But if they're going to get outrageous about it, then no."* -- *"If it's say \$500 for the year, that's going to be easier to pay over 12 months than trying to pay most of it in a few months."* -- *"That way I could know what I had to spend each month. That would help me."* **However, they expressed some distrust about how *"that average would be arrived at."*** This distrust appeared to be based on their perceptions about current estimated bills (by the gas and electric companies) being incorrect.

## **EMERGENCY SUMMER COOLING PROGRAM**

**Participants strongly agreed there should be an emergency summer cooling program for people with breathing difficulties and families with small children so they don't get disconnected.** -- *"There are a lot of people with breathing problems...and that's a serious health risk."* -- *"...My son has asthma, and I can't afford to have my electricity cut off because he's on a machine four times a day...."* -- *"I really can't breathe when it's very hot....I gasp....But then I see my electric bill going up, up, up."*

## **REWARD FOR ON-TIME PAYMENTS**

**Participants liked the idea of getting a reward for on-time payments.** (Examples of rewards they might receive were an extra HEAP benefit that could be applied to their bill or the elimination of a portion of their arrearages.) **Most participants appeared to prefer having a portion of their arrearages eliminated.** However, some pointed out that it didn't make much difference because any extra HEAP benefit would indirectly affect the amount of their arrearage anyhow.

**Participants agreed a reward would provide incentive for making on-time payments.** -- *"And then maybe you wouldn't have so many people going down there with their shut-off notices....That would be one good way to cut down on that, because they know if they pay on time...they're going to knock my bill down...."* -- *"It makes you want to pay your bill on time."*

## **SANCTIONS FOR LATE PIPP PAYMENTS**

**Most participants said they didn't "see the sense" in a sanction for failing to make PIPP payments** (e.g., a co-payment in order to receive E-HEAP funds). -- *"They've already gotten a termination notice because they have no money...so where's the co-payment going to come from?"* -- *"They're already getting the penalty of getting their heat or whatever turned off."* -- *"...Most people want to pay their bills. If they had the money, they'd pay it."* -- *"No, if they can't make their PIPP they got enough trouble. They got more trouble than you want to know about."*

## **MAKING E-HEAP AVAILABLE IN AUGUST**

Most participants did not think this would be particularly helpful, because it's later in the year *"when I get into trouble and I need the help."* Quite a few participants said it would be *"most helpful"* if they were able to get E-HEAP twice a year, with the summer payment (E-HEAP or HEAP) going toward the electric bill.