Frequently Asked Questions: Low-Income Household Water Assistance (LIHWA) Program

The Low-Income Household Water Assistance (LIHWA) Program is a temporary federal assistance program that provides low-income Oregonians with assistance for their drinking water and wastewater service charges. The U.S. Health & Human Services' Office of Community Services (OCS), who funds this program, has designated Oregon Housing & Community Services (OHCS) as the grantee for the State of Oregon. The Community Action Agency (CAA) network will administer the program at the local level.

Topic	Question	Answer
Application Process	Can a household apply for the Low-Income Household Water Assistance (LIHWA) Program more than once?	No, this temporary funding allows for households to receive one LIHWA assistance within this funding period. However, if households are experiencing a crisis situation (see "How do households qualify for crisis payments"), they should contact their local CAA office to see if they qualify for an additional payment.
Application Process	Can a household apply for LIHWA and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) assistance at the same time?	Eligibility requirements of each program must be met for households to qualify for assistance, including the separate LIHWA and LIHEAP applications. If the CAAs are able to provide both forms of assistance to a household at one time, OHCS encourages them to do so when appropriate.
Application Process	Can all of the residents in a multifamily complex or manufactured home park, who pay their landlord for water and sewer, apply on one application?	No, each household must apply separately. The landlord authorization form must accompany each application to enforce application of credit to the individual household.
Application Process	Can households apply for LIHWA assistance regardless of citizenship or residency status?	All household members must provide proof of a valid Social Security number.
Application Process	How do households verify their application status?	Community Action Agencies (CAAs) have their own application processes that vary. Households should refer to their local CAAs for application process and verification.
Application Process	How does someone apply for water assistance through the LIHWA Program?	Households in need of water assistance can apply with their local CAA office. Households can locate their local CAAs by referring to the LIHWA website.
Application Process	How long will water assistance through the LIHWA Program be available?	The CAAs have through September 30, 2023, to accept applications. Once funding is exhausted, CAAs will no longer be able to accept additional applications for LIHWA assistance.
Application Process	If a household is going to be disconnected from water service, how can LIHWA assistance help?	The household needs to apply for LIHWA assistance with their local CAA. The CAA would inform the household of any required documents or processes to determine eligibility. Once the household is eligible, the CAA would then contact the utility with commitment of the LIHWA assistance payment. The contact between the CAA and utility, which is stipulated in the vendor agreement, would avert the disconnection. If there are other documents or processes required, the CAA would inform the household.
Application Process	What documents should households prepare for their LIHWA application?	At a minimum, households should be prepared with social security cards or numbers for all household members, valid form of identification for all adults, their most recent water and wastewater utility bill(s), and proof of income received in the last 30 days or last calendar month. CAAs may have additional documentation required. Households should contact their local CAAs for more information.
Application Process	When will water assistance through the LIHWA Program become available?	Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) anticipates making the program live in January 2022. As this is a new program, timelines may change.
Eligibility	Are households who pay their landlords for water and wastewater costs eligible for LIHWA assistance?	Yes, these households are eligible for the program. Part of their application will involve obtaining the landlord authorization form (see "What is a landlord authorization"), which will release utility information to the CAAs and assure reduction in rent based on the amount of LIHWA assistance the household receives.
Eligibility	Are there any sources of income that are counted towards LIHEAP eligibility but not for LIHWA eligibility?	Yes, there is one source of income that are excluded from countable income with the LIHWA Program, which is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
Eligibility	Can CAAs use categorical eligiblity to determine household eligibility for the LIHWA Program?	If the same household received LIHEAP within the same program year, the CAA may automatically qualify that household for LIHWA. Categorical eligibility for other programs is not allowed.
Eligibility	Can households receive LIHWA assistance for separate water and wastewater bills?	Yes, the LIHWA Program can apply to both water and sewer bills, whether they are combined through one utility or separate through two. This also applies when households have only one bill because of either a well for their drinking water or a septic tank for their sewage.
Eligibility	Do households have to be disconnected or past due to receive LIHWA assistance?	No, households may apply for LIHWA assistance when they have current standing with their water and wastewater utilities.
Eligibility	Do households need to be impacted by COVID to receive LIHWA assistance?	No, households do not need to be impacted by COVID to qualify for LIHWA assistance.
Eligibility	Does affiliation with an Oregon Tribe affect a household's eligibility for the LIHWA Program?	Affiliation with an Oregon Tribe most likely will not affect eligibility for the LIHWA Program. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs was the only Oregon Tribe to receive a direct LIHWA allocation. Households with member(s) of affiliation with an Oregon Tribe should apply to their local CAA to determine eligibility for LIHWA assistance.
Eligibility	How do households determine if their utilities are eligible for the program?	There is a list of all eligible utilities organized by CAA posted on the LIHWA website. This list shows eligible utilities rather than those with executed vendor agreements.
Eligibility	How do households know if they are able to qualify for LIHWA assistance?	Households that are low-income and pay a utility or their landlord for water and wastewater services are encouraged to apply. Households who are on subsidized rent and have water and sewer costs included in rent are not eligible for assistance, because they do not have a demonstrated water burden.
Eligibility	How does receipt of LIHWA assistance affect other forms of household assistance (food stamps, rent assistance)?	Receiving LIHWA assistance will not affect previous, current, or future enrollment in any other assistance or utility program.
Eligibility	If a household has infrastructure issues (such as broken pipes) that are preventing the utility from reconnecting service, is the household still eligible for LIHWA Program assistance?	Yes, households may still be eligible for LIHWA assistance in this case. Households experiencing infastructure issues (such as broken pipes) are encouraged to reach out to their local CAA to determine if services are available for such repairs.
Eligibility	What is the income eligibility for the LIHWA Program?	Household gross income must be at or below 60% State Median Income (SMI).
Payment	Can LIHWA assistance be applied toward retroactive water and wastewater charges?	Yes, LIHWA assistance can apply to water and wastewater charges billed in October 2020 and forward.
Payment	Can LIHWA assistance be used on an account that was sent to collections?	If the charges for a water or wastewater account are maintained by an internal collections department with the utility, then LIHWA assistance may be applied to that account. If the charges were sent to a collections agency outside of the utility, LIHWA assistance may not be applied to that account.
Payment	Can LIHWA assistance be used to place a deposit on an account?	Yes, LIHWA assistance can pay for the deposit on water and wastewater accounts.
Payment	Do households have to pay back LIHWA assistance at any point?	No, all payments are considered gifts or grants.
Payment	How can households cover other charges on the water and wasterwater bill that LIHWA assistance cannot cover?	OHCS recommends CAAs to work with utilities to make payment arrangements with the households to cover other charges. If this is not possible, households may seek other CAA or community assistance programs to cover those charges. Additionally, households are encouraged to work with their utilities to set up payment arrangements if possible.
Payment	How do households qualify for crisis payments?	Crisis situations include, but are not limited to, those cases in which water or wastewater is disconnected, pending disconnection, or when disconnection will result in a life-threatening situation. CAAs determine a household's eligiblity for crisis payment on a case-by-case situation.
Payment	How much LIHWA assistance can a household receive?	Eligible households may receive standard assistance payments specific to their individual need between a floor (or minimum) of $100 and a ceiling (or maximum) of $1,000. Households experiencing crisis (see "How to households qualify for crisis payments") may qualify for an additional $100 to $1,000 assistance payment, depending on individual need.
Payment	What are examples of eligible costs and ineligible costs on water and wastewater bills?	Eligible costs include, but are not limited to, charges for water and wastewater, stormwater, reconnection and late fees, and bonds. Ineligible costs include, but are not limited to, charges for electricity or heat, garbage, streetlights, police and fire services and bonds, administration, irrigation, and road construction or maintenance.
Payment	What happens to remaining credit from LIHWA assistance if households move into the service territory of another utility?	CAAs are encouraged to either pay utility accounts to current or, if the account is already current, place a small credit on the account. If a credit still remains and a household member is the account holder, a rebate will be authorized to the household. If the landlord is the account holder, the landlord must pay the credit to the household (stipulated in the landlord authorization).

Payment	Who does the CAA pay when a household qualifies for LIHWA assistance?	CAAs pay the water or wastewater utility directly. Households do not receive direct payments from the CAAs.
Vendor Agreements	As utility information is not considered public record, how can utilities speak with CAAs on behalf of households?	The vendor agreements between the CAAs and utilities grant the CAAs the ability to speak with the utilities on behalf of households in order to acquire account information and provide assistance.
Vendor Agreements	Can utilities provide feedback and modify the vendor agreements to fit their needs?	As the LIHWA Program is an emergency assistance program for low-income households, OHCS vetted the vendor agreement through the Oregon Department of Justice to pare it down while meeting legal requirements. If utilities continue to face hardship, they are asked to seek guidance from OHCS.
Vendor Agreements	How can households obtain water and wastewater assistance if their utility has not signed a vendor agreement with the CAA?	CAAs and utilities should work closely together to execute vendor agreements. However, if this is not possible, households may be referred to other CAA assistance programs, including Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program (OERAP), for possible water assistance.
Vendor Agreements	How do CAAs ensure LIHWA commitments and payments will reconnect or avert disconnection for households?	The vendor agreement enforces action by the utility to apply the LIHWA commitment in lieu of payment, as it is anticipated.
Vendor Agreements	How long after CAAs make a commitment on behalf of a household will the utilities receive payment?	CAAs will send a bulk payment with an itemized authorization list (household name, account number, and payment amount) at a frequency agreed upon between the service provider and utility, which is no more than 45 days from commitment.
Vendor Agreements	Is there anything that utilities can do to prepare prior to receiving the vendor agreement?	OHCS recommends utilities to begin discussions with their boards or councils who approve legal documents and agreements.
Vendor Agreements	What are vendor agreements and why are they required for LIHWA Program participation?	Vendor agreements serve as the legal agreement required for CAAs to make LIHWA payments to utilities on behalf of their customers. They allow utilities to release customer information to the CAAs, build in protections for all those involved, and assure payments are applied to accounts.
Vendor Agreements	What is the procedure for water and wastewater utilities that provide services in multiple counties?	If those utilities provide services in counties assisted by one CAA, then those utilities must have one vendor agreement in place. If those utilities provide services in counties assisted by two or more CAAs, then those utilities must have one vendor agreement for each CAA.
Vendor Agreements	Who initiates the vendor agreement execution process: the CAAs or the utilities?	OHCS will provide CAAs with vendor agreements, who will then initiate the execution process (i.e., contact and signatures) with the utilities.
Landlord Authorization	How do CAAs ensure that households, who qualify for LIHWA assistance to their landlord's utility account, receive credit for arrearages owed to the landlord?	The landlord authorization form holds the landlord accountable for the credit and the receipt of LIHWA assistance from the CAA provides proof of payment.
Landlord Authorization	What is a landlord authorization?	A landlord authorization is a release between the CAAs and landlords that allows the CAA to speak with the landlord's utility. It also informs the landlord of the LIHWA assistance payment for a specific household and the amount of credit the household should receive per the landlord's water billing procedures.
Landlord Authorization	What is the benefit to landlords to sign the landlord authorization form?	Signing the landlord authorization form enables the CAAs to access the landlord's water or wastewater utility account and make a payment on behalf of households with arrearages to the landlord or utility.
Landlord Authorization	What should households do if their landlords refuse to sign the landlord authorization?	OHCS understands that this barrier is a problem for this temporary funding, because CAAs are unable to award direct payments to households. Households who are unable to acquire a signed landlord authorization should seek out other available funding, such as the OERAP Program.
General Program and Administration	As the LIHWA Program extends over two program years, will the funding reflect this in two different program years for eligibility purposes?	No. For accounting purposes if funds remain at the end of the first program year, OPUS documentation may indicate a second stage of funding.
General Program and Administration	Do CAAs need to track both funding allocations of the LIHWA Program separately?	Yes, the CAAs must track the funds separately so that OHCS can meet the requirements for federal reporting.
General Program and Administration	How can CAAs streamline the application process for LIHWA?	Because LIHEAP and LIHWA require very similar documentation, the application processes are parallel and require little modification in OPUS data entry. CAAs may also use receipt of LIHEAP in the same program year for the same household as categorical eligibility.
General Program and Administration	How did OHCS determine the standard payment range?	Oregon does not have an existing statewide water assistance program, so OHCS engaged early with water and wastewater utilities as well as other in-house programs to obtain data. The range is based off of requests for water assistance submitted through the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program (OERAP).
General Program and Administration	How much funding will CAAs have available to administer the program, conduct outreach, and make client payments?	OHCS will allocate CAAs 10% of their budget for administration for costs related to organizational salaries, accounting, grants management, and reporting. An additional 10% will be dedicated for outreach for costs related to coordination with community responsive organizations, advertisement, eligibility determination, and application notification processes. The remaining 80% will be dedicated to vendor payments on behalf of their eligible households.
General Program and Administration	What are the target populations and priorities of the LIHWA Program?	The target population is low-income households with high water burdens. Priorities include water and wastewater service continuity through household reconnections, averting disconnections, and paying arrearages. Provision of assistance is based on individual CAA policy.
General Program and Administration	What database will OHCS implement for data entry?	OHCS plans to administer LIHWA through OPUS, which is our database that already houses information for our energy assistance and weatherization programs.
General Program and Administration	What is the difference between LIHWA and the LIHEAP?	LIHWA provides water and wastewater assistance, does not count TANF as income, and cannot make direct payments to clients. LIHEAP provides home energy (heating, cooling, electricity, etc.) assistance, counts TANF as income, and may make direct payments to clients who qualify.