Taking Customer Assistance to the Next Level

June 2015
Overview of Austin Energy

- Nation’s 9th largest community-owned utility
- Serves more than 420,000 customers
- Annual revenues total $1.2 billion
Who are we?

The Customer Assistance Program (CAP) encompasses all of the City of Austin sponsored programs designed to assist moderate to low-income customers in regards to their utility bill.

What we do?

The goal of the Customer Assistance Program is to maximize the participation of eligible City of Austin utility customers by better promoting and presenting these programs to utility customers, civic, public, and private organizations.

Why?

Austin Energy promotes programs designed to provide assistance to customers in the areas of financial support, case management, dispute resolution, energy efficiency improvements and water conservation.
Program Components

• Discounts
• Financial Support Plus 1
• Medically Vulnerable Registry
• Education Classes
• Weatherization
• Community Connections Resource Fair
• Case Management Project
• Affordable Energy Policy Summit
• Refugee Project
Community Challenges

- We don’t do enough?
- We do too much?
- Why not this program?
- Why do I have to pay for it?
- Why can’t we just forgive the debt?
- Why are services concentrated in this area?
- What are you doing to help low income families?
- Why can’t we decide what is important to fund?
- Who is overseeing these programs?
Who do you support receiving these services?

- Long term disease or chronic illness: 7.9
- Elderly: 7.9
- Extreme financial distress: 7.6
- Low income: 7.3
- Households with children under 5: 6.4
Willingness to pay for support services

- Round up bill to support services: 7.3
- Commercial customers pay a fee to support services: 4.6
- Residential customers pay a fee to support services: 3.0
Collaborations

**Agencies**
- Texas Legal Services
- Ladies of Charity
- Austin Tenant’s Council

**Utility Departments**
- Austin Energy
- Austin Resource Recovery
- Austin Water
- Austin Watershed Protection

**Community Partner Network**
- Front Steps
- Goodwill
- Greater Mount Zion
- Hospice Austin
- LifeWork’s
- Refugee Services of Texas
  (plus 29 more)

**Discount Steering Committee**
- COA Housing Authority
- Travis County
- Caritas of Austin
- Texas VFW
- Any Baby Can
- Meals on Wheels & More
- St. Austin Catholic Church

**Advocacy Groups**
- Austin Interfaith
- One Voice
- Community Action Network
- Texas Gray Panthers
- Texas ROSE

**Working Committee**
Community Collaborations

Community Advocacy Group (CAG)

• Comprised of advocacy groups
• Created to assist on policy change recommendations
• Works to garner broad community support on issues related to vulnerable customers
• Changes this group spearheaded
  • Summer and winter disconnects moratorium
  • Medically vulnerable program changes
  • Payment Arrangement Policy
  • Arrearage Program
Community Collaborations

Discount Steering Committee (DSC)

- Comprised of community agencies that have direct collaborations/agreements with AE
- Designed for AE to work with community partners who provide direct service
- Gives partners an opportunity to provide guidance on key issues
- Makes recommendations on assistance program implementation and structure
- Changes this group spearheaded
  - Expansion of the Discount Program
  - Oversight on Weatherization and Education Components
  - Payment Arrangement Policy
  - Arrearage Program
Community Collaborations

Community Partner Network (CPN)

- Comprised of community agencies that have direct collaborations/agreements with AE
- Designed for AE to assist with disseminating emergency financial utility assistance
- Develop plan for ensuring utility services remain intact

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<tr>
<th>Community Partner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Any Baby Can</td>
<td>Front Steps</td>
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<td>St. Matthew's</td>
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<td>Meals on Wheels &amp; More</td>
<td>St. Paul</td>
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<td>UT - Student Emergency Services</td>
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Discount Program

• 50% growth – enrollment
• 75% growth – funding
• New qualifiers
  • All Medicaid types
  • Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
  • Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
  • Telephone Lifeline Program
  • Travis County Comprehensive Energy Assistance Program (CEAP)
  • Medical Access Program (MAP)
• Automatic enrollment
Discount Program-Expansion

- Electric Service Customer Charge waiver
- Discount (10%) on total electrical usage
- Discount on Community Benefit Charge (CAP)
- Water Service Customer Charge waiver
- Water Tiered Fixed Charge Waiver
- Water Volume Charge discount
- Wastewater Service Customer Charge waiver
- Drainage Fee 50% discount
Discount Program-Expansion

Education Component
• Required pre-requisite for all weatherization program participants
• One interactive 4 hour class for the whole family
• Flexible class schedules
• Spanish classes available

Curriculum Research & Development
• Understanding your usage and bill
• Energy and water conservation
• Indoor air quality
• Budgeting
• Source of energy and water
• Reduce/reuse/recycle
• Safety hazards
• Tenant rights
Weatherization Program

- Targets high usage customers
- Home Assessment
- Case Management
- Serves Renters & Homeowners
- Structural Referrals
Discount Program-Expansion

• Evaluation Components
• Pre and Post Tests after each session
• Overall comprehension after course completion
• Energy and Water consumption tracked
• 6 months prior to energy efficiency measures
• 18 months after energy efficiency measures
• Self-Assessments conducted 6, 12 and 18 months
Financial Support Plus 1 Program

- Internal yearly customer segmentation
- External customer segmentation from 2-1-1
  - Data provides two perspectives
    - Internally what is happening with customer base
    - Externally what are our customers struggling with on a daily basis
- Identifies service gaps within service territory
- Identifies outreach target areas
- 35 Partner Network
- Expanded Funding ($1,200,000)
- Agency Budget Plan
Medically Vulnerable Program

- Expanded protections
  - Life Support equipment (238 HH)
  - Critical Illness (47 HH)
  - Serious Illness (45 HH)

- Home visits
  - New enrollments
  - Yearly contact

- Referrals to other social service providers
- One-on-one case management
- Manual collections process
- Third party notification
Case Management Project

- Community based organizations serving high risk populations
  - Families with children who have severe medical issues
  - Elderly low income
  - Families struggling with HIV/AIDS
  - Homeless veterans
- Single point of contact from Austin Energy
  - Customer Solution Coordinators (CSC)
  - Direct contact with agencies
  - Create comprehensive action plans
  - Flexibility in policy decisions
Other Program Components

Affordable Energy Policy Summit

• Introduces utility changes to the community
• Communication avenue for community partners
• Community Input
• Targets local social service providers
  • Non-profits
  • Faith-based groups
  • Government agencies
  • Advocacy groups
  • Low income housing representatives
Community Connections Resource Fair

• Utility meets customer at community level
• Holistic approach to customer service
• One-stop place to reach basic needs services
• Targets low to moderate income customers
• Focuses on high poverty zip codes
• Over 800 participants with over 90 community agencies represented
Other Program Components

Refugee Project

• Two agency collaboration
  • Refugee Services of Texas
  • Caritas
• Customers denied services because of inability to provide a valid ID
• Worked within the confines of our service regulations
  • Potential customers were vetted by federal government
  • Utilized I-9 ID’s as a temporary ID
  • 6 weeks later social security number is provided
• Account case managed by Austin Energy
  • Accounts in customer’s own name
  • Accounts are managed until social security numbers are provided
• Customer case managed by Referring Agency
  • Education about utility bill
  • Understanding a utility bill
  • How to manage their utility bill
  • Paying their utility bill
Success

- Ongoing community dialogue
- Internal cross-functional programming
- Coalition building
- Utility Financial Integrity
- Interpersonal dynamics with customer base
- Utility awareness of community conditions
- Understanding individual customer needs
- Customer segmentation
- Community perception of the utility
- True partner for a multi-faceted community
Overall Program Ratings

- CAP: Satisfied with program - 8.7
- Medically Vulnerable: Satisfied with program - 8.2
- Partners: Satisfied with program - 9.1
- CAP-Met expectations - 8.9
- Medically Vulnerable-Met expectations - 8.5
- Partners-Met expectations - 8.8
Questions?