

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?	Possibly. Households are only eligible for a single payment with this temporary funding. However, if households are experiencing a crisis situation (see "How do households qualify for crisis payments"), they should contact their local Community Action Agency (CAA) office to see if they qualify for additional assistance.
Application Process	Can a household apply for LIHWA and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) assistance at the same time?	It is possible to qualify for both programs at the same time, but this is dependent upon the local CAA's application process and availability of funding. Eligibility requirements of each program must be met for households to qualify for assistance, including provisions of required documentation.
Application Process	Can households apply for LIHWA assistance regardless of citizenship or residency status?	The income limit for household size is based on the total number of household members with proof of valid Social Security numbers. At least one household member must have a valid Social Security number to qualify for the LIHWA Program, but all household members are encouraged to provide proof.
Application Process	How do households verify their application status?	Each CAA has its own application process specific to its service territory. 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, however, CAAs will no longer be able to accept additional applications for the LIHWA Program. Additional LIHWA Program funding is contingent on federal and state allocations.
Application Process	If a household is going to be disconnected from water service, how can LIHWA assistance help?	Households need 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 water/sewer vendor with commitment of the LIHWA assistance payment. This commitment serves to avert the disconnection or reconnection of services. 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 official proof of numbers for all household members, valid form of identification for all adults, their most recent water/sewer 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) was informed that several agencies are currently providing LIHWA assistance as of May 2022. As this is a new program, the "live" date will be staggered for each CAA.
Eligibility	Are households who rent and have a dedicated water/sewer meter for their dwelling eligible for LIHWA assistance?	These households should apply with their local CAAs for LIHWA assistance. The CAA will require a landlord authorization form (see "What is a landlord authorization") to access the utility account and verify arrearages.
Eligibility	Are households who rent and share a water/sewer meter among their dwelling and others eligible for LIHWA assistance?	These households should apply with their local CAAs for LIHWA assistance. Households in this situation may be eligible for assistance. The CAA will require a landlord authorization form (see "What is a landlord authorization") to access the utility account and verify arrearages.
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 express eligibility or enrollment 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. If household composition (members) change or the dwelling address changes, the household will need to requalify for LIHWA assistance. Express enrollment for other programs is not allowed.
Eligibility	Can households receive LIHWA assistance for separate water and sewer bills?	Yes, the LIHWA Program can apply to both water and sewer bills, whether or not they are provided by the same vendor. This also applies when households have only one bill because of having 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 sewer bills.
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. However, households may be able to qualify for additional assistance if in crisis, which may include a COVID impact.
Eligibility	Does affiliation with an Oregon Tribe affect a household's eligibility for the LIHWA Program?	There are some Oregon Tribes who have received dedicated LIHWA assistance. 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 water/sewer vendor(s) are eligible for the LIHWA Program?	There is a list of all eligible utilities organized by CAA posted on the LIHWA website. Households are recommended to apply for LIHWA assistance through their local CAA, even if their vendor is not listed as they may be served through another vendor indirectly.
Eligibility	How do households know if they are able to qualify for LIHWA assistance?	Households that are low-income and pay a water/sewer vendor or their landlord for water and sewer services are encouraged to apply.
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 assistance?	Households may still be eligible for LIHWA assistance in these cases. Households experiencing infrastructure issues (such as broken pipes) are encouraged to reach out to their local CAA to determine if services or a referral of 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 (older) water and sewer charges?	Yes, LIHWA assistance can apply to all current and past charges for water and sewer services, as long as they are for the current address and not discharged to an independent collection agency.
Payment	Can LIHWA assistance be used on an account that was sent to collections?	If the charges for a water or sewer account are maintained by an internal collections department with the vendor, then LIHWA assistance may be applied to that account. If the charges were sent to a collections agency outside of the vendor, 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 sewer accounts. Households or eligible vendors must provide proof of an active account number.
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 sewer bill that LIHWA assistance cannot cover?	OHCS recommends CAAs to work with vendors and eligible households to coordinate payment arrangements on those households' accounts to cover ineligible charges. If this is not possible, households may seek other CAA or community assistance programs to cover those charges.
Payment	How do households qualify for crisis payments?	Crisis situations include, but are not limited to, events or conditions leading to water or sewer disconnection, when pending disconnection will result in a life-threatening situation, or another situation that affects the ability to pay their water/sewer bills. CAAs determine a household's eligibility for crisis payment on a case-by-case situation.
Payment	How much LIHWA assistance can a household receive?	Eligible households may receive a standard assistance payment specific to their individual need. At a minimum, households may qualify for \$100. Households experiencing crisis (see "How to households qualify for crisis payments") may qualify for a crisis payment. Households are encouraged to apply with their local CAA to determine their LIHWA assistance amount.
Payment	What are examples of eligible and ineligible costs on water and sewer bills?	Eligible costs include, but are not limited to, charges for water, sewer, 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 vendor?	CAAs are encouraged to either pay vendor accounts to current or, if the account is already at a zero balance, place a small credit on the account. If a credit still remains at the time of vacancy, the vendor will work to authorize a rebate to the household.
Payment	Who does the CAA pay when a household qualifies for LIHWA assistance?	CAAs pay the water or sewer vendor directly. Households do not receive direct payments from the CAAs.

Vendor Agreements	As vendor information is not considered public record, how can vendors speak with CAAs on behalf of households?	The vendor agreements between the CAAs and water/sewer vendors grant the CAAs the ability to speak with the vendors on behalf of households in order to acquire account information and provide assistance. Additionally, households sign a LIHWA Program disclaimer to allow the CAAs to speak with the vendors. If the account holder is a landlord, the household also provides a landlord authorization form.
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 vendors continue to face hardship, they are asked to seek guidance from OHCS.
Vendor Agreements	How can households obtain water and sewer assistance if their vendor has not signed a vendor agreement with the CAA?	CAAs and vendors should work closely together to execute vendor agreements. However, if this is not possible, households may be referred to other CAA assistance programs 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 vendor 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 vendors 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 CAA and vendor, which is no more than 45 days from commitment.
Vendor Agreements	Is there anything that vendors can do to prepare prior to receiving the vendor agreement?	OHCS recommends vendors 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 eligible water/sewer vendors on behalf of eligible households (customers). In combination with the LIHWA Program disclaimer, they allow vendors to release customer information to the CAAs, build in protections for all parties involved, and assure the correct payments are applied to the correct accounts.
Vendor Agreements	What is the procedure for water and sewer vendors that provide services in multiple counties?	If vendors provide services in counties served by more than one CAA, those vendors will hold vendor agreements with all applicable CAAs.
Vendor Agreements	Who initiates the vendor agreement execution process: the CAAs or the vendors?	OHCS will provide CAAs with vendor agreements, who will then initiate the execution process (i.e., contact and signatures) with the vendors. If vendors have not received contact from a CAA and wish to participate, those vendors are encouraged to contact your local CAA to determine eligibility and receive a vendor agreement.
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 water/sewer vendor. It also informs the landlord of the LIHWA assistance payment being applied for a specific property or park.
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 sewer vendor account and make a payment on account arrearages on behalf of eligible households.

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 are recommended to seek other CAA or community assistance.
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. However, households are only eligible for a single, standard LIHWA payment throughout the program funding period.
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 nearly parallel. CAAs must have separate, complete LIHEAP and LIHWA applications maintained. CAAs may also use receipt of LIHEAP in the same program year for the same household (unless the household composition or dwelling address has changed) as express enrollment or eligibility. LIHWA shall not be used as express enrollment for other assistance programs.
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 sewer vendors as well as other in-house programs to obtain data. The range is based off data submitted through the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program (OERAP) for water assistance requests.
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, but are not limited to, water and sewer service continuity through household reconnections, averting disconnections, and paying arrearages. Provision of assistance is based on individual CAA procedures and 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 sewer 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 allow for direct payments to clients who qualify.