



Office of Sustainability

February 22, 2021

Representative Pam Marsh, Chair
House Committee on Energy and Environment
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE, Room D
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Multnomah County Strongly Support HB 3141

Chair Marsh and members of the Committee:

The Multnomah County Office of Sustainability asks for your support of House Bill 3141, a bill with important measures to protect our most vulnerable residents and incorporate equity in incentives for small-scale and customer-sited clean energy resources in Oregon.

HB 3141 would allow Multnomah County to serve more households with energy assistance and with the long-term benefits from weatherization at a time of critical need. It would also add an equity component to, and extend, the public purpose charge, a key funding stream as Oregon transitions to a clean, resilient, reliable, just, and affordable energy future.

Our community has faced tremendous challenges in the last year, like the pandemic, the summer wildfires, and the winter event that left hundreds of thousands of Oregonians without power just days ago. These crises highlight that energy access is vital, especially to those most vulnerable. They also highlight how important it is to continue our work to ensure our communities are resilient and have reliable access to clean energy. HB 3141 sets important elements in place that will allow us to continue that work.

Improving circumstances for more vulnerable households through weatherization

HB 3141 will allow our weatherization program to offer a durable solution to more households in need. Indeed, with expanded weatherization funding, we will be able to improve the quality of life of a greater number of eligible low-income households in Multnomah County, while reducing their carbon footprint and financial exposure to energy bills. Importantly, HB 3141 ensures that these weatherization funds will remain in place for the next fifteen years.

The bill would also include manufactured home replacement and fuel switching from oil to electric as allowable weatherization services, allowing us to address two key drivers of energy burden: energy inefficiency in older homes and higher-costs fuels like oil. These changes in HB 3141 will directly reduce energy burden and improve livability for low income households rather than limiting us to repairing homes or energy systems that are inherently inefficient.

Providing more crisis relief through energy assistance

Low income and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) communities face high energy burdens,¹ while having limited access to tools that wealthier households use to control their electricity bills, like weatherization and rooftop solar.² At the same time, sources of bill assistance are limited and often insufficient to meet the need. For example, in fiscal year 2019, almost 25% of the households in Multnomah County were eligible for Energy Assistance, yet only 18% of eligible households applied for and received benefits.

The expanded energy assistance funding in HB 3141 will help us provide desperately needed bill assistance to our vulnerable communities in this time of crisis. Low-income households are disproportionately energy burdened,³ and COVID-19 has only increased that energy insecurity.⁴ Energy insecurity is even more prevalent for our BIPOC communities because they are more likely to experience economic hardship that prevents them from meeting their basic energy needs.⁵ The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have also disproportionately impacted

¹ Oregon Department of Energy, *Oregon County Profiles: Multnomah County* (Nov. 1, 2020), <https://energyinfo.oregon.gov/2020-counties/2020/11/1/multnomah-county> (24% of households in Multnomah County are energy burdened.); National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Lights Out in the Cold: Reforming Utility Shut-Off Policies as If Human Rights Matter* at 9-10 (Mar. 2017), https://naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lights-Out-in-the-Cold_NAACP-ECJP-4.pdf.

² See e.g. U.S. Department of Energy, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, *Solar Demographics Tool* (checked on Feb. 21, 2021), <https://emp.lbl.gov/solar-demographics-tool> (In 2018 only 12% of solar adoptees in Multnomah County had incomes lower than \$50,000, while 54% of adoptees had incomes higher than \$100,000).

³ U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, *Low-Income Community Energy Solutions*, <https://www.energy.gov/eere/slsc/low-income-community-energy-solutions#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20U.S.%20Department,which%20is%20estimated%20at%203%25> (Average energy burden for low income households is 8.6%, three times higher than households not living on low incomes)

⁴ Indiana University, *COVID-19 increased energy insecurity among low-income Americans* (Jan. 20, 2021), <https://phys.org/news/2021-01-covid-energy-insecurity-low-income-americans.html>.

⁵ *Lights Out in the Cold* at 9-10.

these communities.⁶ Indeed, today our most vulnerable communities are at risk of losing access to electric and gas utility services.

We expect the need for energy assistance to increase tremendously as a result of the pandemic. The electric and gas utilities that serve Multnomah County have a disconnection moratorium currently slated to end on April 1, 2021. The moratorium has kept our vulnerable communities with access to essential utility service through the pandemic. However, vulnerable households impacted by the economic and health crisis continue to accrue utility debt, so the need for bill assistance has never been greater. By increasing assistance available to the community, as well as income eligibility and benefit levels, HB 3141 gives us another tool to stem the tide of utility disconnections that risks materializing when the moratorium ends.

In light of that increased need, we are especially appreciative of provisions in HB 3141 that reduce both barriers to access and burden on low income households applying for pandemic-related energy assistance. The bill would allow us to distribute that funding through “express enrollment.”⁷ We were able to rely on this enrollment tool when distributing Energy Assistance Stability Coronavirus Relief program funds earlier in the pandemic. As a result, our ability to serve households with that funding increased tremendously. We strongly support use of this enrollment tool in the additional energy assistance that HB 3141 would put in place.

Building stronger weatherization and energy assistance programs

HB 3141 strengthens our ability to serve communities in need of energy assistance and weatherization. In general, funding increases for energy assistance and weatherization have been short term, one-time only increases. This reality has made it difficult for us to increase program capacity at a time when the community need continues to grow. HB 3141 provides long-term funding increases that will allow programs to develop and to sustain increased program capacity. As a result, HB 3141 would allow us to have stronger programs that are able to serve more eligible households every year.

Importantly, HB 3141 will also help us better serve our undocumented community, one of Oregon’s most vulnerable communities. Federal energy assistance and weatherization programs

⁶ Multnomah County, *New numbers show COVID-19 damage to communities of color; leaders call for better data collection* (May 1, 2020), <https://multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/new-numbers-show-covid-19-damage-communities-color-leaders-call>; Pew Research Center, *Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity* (May 5, 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.

⁷ Express enrollment is the ability to use eligibility for other low-income programs to determine a community member’s eligibility for energy assistance.

have eligibility restrictions that result on little to no access for our undocumented community. For example, the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) requires that at least one household member has a social security number (SSN) for the household to be served. Even then, the assistance award is drastically impacted by the number of household members without an SSN.

By expanding funding for state energy assistance and weatherization programs, HB 3141 would increase resources that are not restricted for undocumented households. Our undocumented community has been specially vulnerable to the health and economic impacts of this pandemic without many of the safety nets that have helped other households stay afloat. HB 3141 will help us better serve them.

Increasing resilience while ensuring a just and equitable energy transition

HB 3141 ensures that we continue to have the public purpose charge in place for the next fifteen years and improves this funding stream. The public purpose charge supports a lot of the work that communities are doing to transition to an energy future that is clean, resilient, reliable, just, and affordable. We support both the extension of the public purpose charge and the expansion of the types of technologies that it can incentivize. These changes are an important step to help our community make investments that will make us more resilient and better able to face challenges to our access to energy like those we have seen in the last year.

We must also make sure that our energy transition is just and equitable, and that low-income and other environmental justice communities will not continue having to largely look at the benefits of this transition from the outside.⁸ HB 3141 takes steps to ensure that the public purpose charge incentives for clean energy reach beyond those in a position of privilege. First, it reserves 25% of the funding for renewable and distributed-level resources for low and moderate income customers and adds greater flexibility to how those incentives are structured. Second, it requires the Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) to establish, and periodically revise, equity metrics for accountability on environmental justice in the use of the public purpose charge. It also requires the Energy Trust of Oregon (ETO) to report on its progress on achieving the equity metrics. These important changes to advance a more equitable allocation of incentives.

⁸Data on single-family residential solar adoption shows that the majority of solar adopters in Oregon in 2018 have annual incomes over \$100,000. Only 14% had annual incomes under \$50,000. Yet, as we outline elsewhere in this testimony, lower income households are disproportionately energy burdened. As a result, it is concerning that low-income households generally see so few of the solar installations that could help address their energy burden. U.S. Department of Energy, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, *Solar Demographics Tool* (checked on Feb. 21, 2021), <https://emp.lbl.gov/solar-demographics-tool><https://emp.lbl.gov/solar-demographics-tool>.

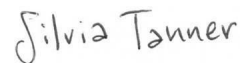
HB 3141 is a step in the right direction. The Multnomah County Office of Sustainability looks forward to continued collaboration with the Legislature, environmental justice communities, and the broad diversity of agencies, entities, and stakeholders on the work that HB 3141 helps advance to protect our vulnerable communities' energy access while advancing a just and clean energy transition.

I appreciate your consideration of these comments and ask for your support of HB 3141.

Sincerely,



John Wasiutynski
Director
john.wasiutynski@multco.us



Silvia Tanner
Senior Sustainability Analyst
silvia.tanner@multco.us