

Department of County Human Services

March 27, 2025

House Committee On Commerce and Consumer Protection
900 Court St. NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Subject: Support for House Bill 3792-3

Chair Sosa and Members of the Committee:

Multnomah County asks for your support for House Bill 3792, with the -3 amendment, which provides a greatly needed increase in funding for the Oregon Energy Assistance Program (OEAP).

Today, many Oregon households remain energy insecure thanks to climate and economic factors that increase their need for energy while worsening their financial reality. Today, 27% of Multnomah County residents are energy burdened, an increase of 3% from 2020. Contributing significantly to these rising levels of energy insecurity is the weight of drastic increases in electricity bills. In fact, residential customers of both Portland General Electric and Pacific Power have seen increases of close to 50% in their energy rates since 2021.

Your support for HB 3792-3 would bring about important changes to OEAP. HB 3792-3 increases the amount collected for OEAP from \$20 to \$40 million, and establishes this amount as a floor. It also directs the Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) to re-evaluate the annual budget every two years and to report to the legislature if it determines that OEAP funds should increase by more than 2.5%. Finally, it directs the PUC to determine a per customer, per site cap, and to reevaluate it every two years.

Multnomah County works to improve the well-being of the community we serve by providing accessible, high-quality, and innovative public services that create stability, enhance opportunities, and reduce disparities. As an energy assistance and weatherization provider, we see firsthand the impact that the drastic rate increases of the last five years have had on some of the most vulnerable members of our community. For example, many households that we serve have carried large balances since the height of the COVID pandemic, and are still unable to climb out of that situation while also dealing with rising bills. It also allows us to witness the tremendous stabilizing power of OEAP illustrated by stories like this one:

January 2025 - PGE minimum nearly \$600, total account balance nearly \$1,800
Client A, a single father, already struggling to make ends meet, found himself facing an overwhelming challenge when he became seriously ill and had to quarantine with his children. As a result, he missed work and wages, while the increased electricity usage from being home

all day and the added costs of medication and PPE only deepened his financial hardship. With the threat of disconnection looming, he was given an OEAP combo to help cover his balance and avoid losing power. This support kept his electricity on and, for the first time in a long while, allowed him to feel like he could breathe again, knowing his family wouldn't be left in the dark.

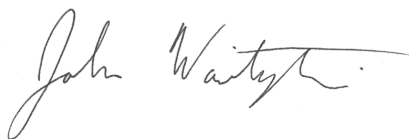
Our role providing energy assistance also gives us insight on how the current funding level fails to meet the tremendous need in our community. Rising rates are causing more households to struggle to pay their utility bills, as well as to owe much higher bill amounts, yet core OEAP funding has not changed since 2017.¹ In fact, only 17% of households who qualify for energy assistance are able to receive it. In the program year 2024, we were able to serve over 6500 households through OEAP, but with your support, we could double that number.

Energy assistance in Oregon has never been sufficiently funded from state or federal sources, but funding levels appear especially at risk today. In the current climate, there is great uncertainty in the stability of federal funding. For context, federal funding today represents more than half the funds available for bill assistance grants. Stabilizing this lifeline service by passing HB 3792-3 is all the more critical in light of Federal instability.

Electricity is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Yet, the high number of disconnections in 2024 show that rising rates jeopardizes our community's access to this critical service. Disconnections threaten people's health and lives, their food security, and their ability to be well and thrive. Disconnections can even be grounds for eviction, an especially concerning impact at a time when housing security is a central issue for Multnomah County and throughout the State of Oregon. Without the increase and added stability that HB 3792-3 would bring to OEAP, this key program would struggle to support households facing the sometimes life-threatening impacts of disconnections.

We look forward to continuing to engage in the important conversations taking place about affordability, stable housing, and access to basic life needs for Oregonians. We appreciate your consideration of these comments and ask for your support of HB 3792 -3.

Sincerely,



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¹ From 2021 through 2024, the legislature authorized an additional \$10,000,000 per year for customers impacted by COVID-19.