

Low Income Utility Assistance Workgroup Meeting

June 23, 2022

2pm-3:30pm

Google Meet joining info

Video call link: <https://meet.google.com/pez-rgax-tnx>

Or dial: (US) +1 443-408-8589 PIN: 437 392 503#

More phone numbers: <https://tel.meet/pez-rgax-tnx?pin=8222720919817>

Meeting Minutes

I. Introductions

- Minutes from May 25, 2022 approved

II. Review of the proposed changes to the OHEP application

- Work group recommendations from the May 25, 2022 meeting were reviewed. These recommendations for changes to the online OHEP application are one of a series of formal recommendations the work group will make to the Department of Human Services and other departments within the state of Maryland under its current charge.
- Revisions for Recommendation #1: OHEP Redetermination Process availability through the MDTHINK portal
 - Workgroup members indicated a desire for OHEP's redetermination process to align closely with the redetermination processes of other successful state programs like SNAP, where SNAP redeterminations can be submitted through a variety of channels (ex: mail, email, fax, online) but all redetermination information can be found in the consumer portal.
 - Workgroup members emphasized the importance of continuing to provide an offline application and redetermination process for customers who do not have access to computers.
 - OHEP Director agreed and clarified that while the Department will continue to work to improve the customer experience through the MDThink consumer portal, traditional avenues for submitting OHEP applications will continue to be available.
 - Recommendation #1 was approved with the revisions above.

- Revisions for Recommendation #2: Streamline Online OHEP Application in MDTHINK portal
 - The workgroup expressed concern about the physical location of DHS applications on the MDTHINK consumer portal. Requested more prominent, clearer location for DHS programs. Current positioning on the MDTHINK platform makes navigating difficult for users who are not already familiar with DHS programs or the MDTHINK consumer portal.
 - Workgroup members inquired about incorporating several existing OHEP forms (ex: Declaration of Zero Income form, Income Verification Form, Household Worksheet) into the MDTHINK platform.
 - Currently, users must leave the MDTHINK platform and navigate to the DHS website in order to access these forms when they could be more fully incorporated into the user experience.
 - Workgroup members reiterated the importance of prioritizing Energy Assistance application questions and information for customers who are in an energy crisis.
 - Members further advised that wrap-around programs should be offered to an OHEP customer once they have submitted their Energy Assistance application, noting the importance of resolving a customer's immediate crisis before offering assistance they may not immediately believe they will need.
 - Members also advised that when wrap-around services are offered to customers, the Department should avoid technical names and acronyms, and instead reference commonly known or easy to understand names for these programs (ex: using "Food Stamps" or "Food Assistance" to refer to SNAP or "Heating Grant" to refer to MEAP)
 - Recommendation #2 was approved with the above changes.

- Revisions for Recommendation #3: Allow submission of Applications for undocumented customers.
 - A workgroup member requested clarification as to how this recommendation would relate to the existing questions around the citizenship requirement for EUSP.
 - OHEP clarified that while this recommendation does not directly address the questions regarding citizenship as a requirement for EUSP, it does set the technical groundwork for changes in that policy which may be forthcoming.
 - Recommendation #3 accepted with the edits above.

- Revisions for Recommendation #4: Pre-populating customer information when they have previously applied for other benefits
 - Workgroup members requested that the recommendation be clarified as to specify DHS programs customers engaged in within the last 12 months.
 - While workgroup members acknowledged that this approach (pre-populating data from previous applications) would not eliminate all

administrative barriers in applying for OHEP assistance, it would streamline most basic demographic information, which can be repetitive when entered individually for every program.

- Workgroup members also identified the OHEP Data Management system's ability to "talk back" to the MDTHINK portal as an area for improvement when OHEP fully integrates into the MDTHINK portal.
- Recommendation #4 accepted with revisions and considerations above.
- Revisions for Recommendation #5: Revise messaging around OHEP programs
 - Workgroup members reiterated their request for simplified language on the OHEP application, especially surrounding the Arrearage retirement programs. (eg: customers do not usually know the term arrearage)
 - Workgroup members discussed specific adjustments to the user-interface in the MDTHINK consumer portal with particular attention paid to when certain grants are introduced.
 - Ex: When an applicant signs up for EUSP and indicates a large past-due balance, a prompt should appear, asking the customer if they would like to receive the EARA grant.
 - The workgroup discussed the merits of the current opt-in approach to arrearage programs as opposed to an "opt-out" approach.
 - Some members expressed interest in having customers "Opt-out" of arrearage programs that they do not wish to receive, while other members expressed concerns about this approach having a deterrent effect on some customers.
 - Citing concerns regarding reading comprehension, reader fatigue, and disabilities, some workgroup members encouraged the department to incorporate audio narration or video narration into the MDTHINK platform. This recommendation should be paired with the simplified language already cited in the workgroup's recommendations.
 - Workgroup members requested that pertinent application information be presented to users prior to beginning their OHEP application. Members specifically requested income-eligibility tables and a list of required supporting documentation at the beginning of the application in order to give customers a more accurate understanding of the time and information required to complete an application.
 - Members also requested language to accompany income eligibility guidelines to the effect of "If you are close to these income guidelines, still apply!"
 - Other tools to help customers complete their online applications included:
 - Interactive checklist of required documentation
 - Auto-generated email "nudge" from MDTHINK platform to remind customers that their application is incomplete (for customers who begin an application but do not submit it)

- API/ “trigger questions” to indicate to OHEP staff that the customer likely already has documentation on file.
 - Ex: Do you receive SNAP benefits
 - Workgroup to review revised recommendation #5 before approving
 - Revisions for Recommendation #6: System Denial of applications after 30 days
 - Much of the work group's discussion of this recommendation revolved around the specifics of the MDTHINK platform’s 30-day deletion rule.
 - MDTHINK clarified that an otherwise completed application which is missing documents would not be deleted after 30 days.
 - Workgroup members emphasized the importance of aligning business processes across DHS programs in the MDTHINK portal.
 - Recommendation #6 approved with revisions.
 - Revisions for Recommendation #7: Customers submitting incomplete applications
 - Remove language from recommendations about prohibiting the submission of an incomplete application.
 - Revisions for Recommendation #8: Relocating and simplifying language regarding the Department of Housing and Community Development’s Weatherization Program
 - None
 - Questions from Members:
 - Question 1 regarding QA testing of the MDTHINK consumer portal should be upgraded to a formal workgroup recommendation.
 - Question 2, which relates to OHEP obtaining data on abandoned MDTHINK applications will be addressed in next month’s meeting.

III. Formal Submission of the Recommendations

- Workgroup reviewed OHEP’s plan for submitting workgroup recommendations to DHS.
 - Following the meeting on 6/23/22, OHEP will incorporate workgroup feedback on written recommendations.
 - OHEP will then provide a final draft of the recommendations prior to the next workgroup meeting for final approval.
 - Once recommendations have been approved by the workgroup, they will be submitted to the Department of Human Services and the MDTHINK team.

IV. Discussion on Outreach and the Energy Assistance Service Model

- With the new state-wide redetermination process, members provided feedback about how to make redetermination notices “Stand out” from other items an applicant would relieve. Some ideas include:
 - Colorful notices with easy to read formatting
 - Consistent logo usage and language to refer to the department throughout the state.
 - Current notices are branded by the local administering agency, which creates inconsistency across the state and dilutes/ confuses the messaging. Additionally, there is inconsistent messaging about which department is contacting the customer (eg: Department of Human Services, Health and Human Services, Community Action Agencies, etc)

V. Member Discussion

- MDTHINK will continue to participate in future meetings of the workgroup in order to provide technical assistance and insight.
- Workgroup members emphasized the importance of considering Categorical Eligibility and its potential impacts and benefits to customers as the workgroup continues its work in examining these programs and evaluation areas of improvement.
- A workgroup member inquired about what resources the department has to allow non-native english speaking customers to access benefits/ application documents and forms.
- Workgroup members requested a decision map/ tree outlining the OHEP application process and all data-points that impact the way an OHEP application is handled (ex: Service termination status)
 - Consider comparison between SNAP crisis applications and OHEP crisis applications.
- Topic for discussion in a future meeting: improving the process for customers to submit supporting documentation to local OHEP offices. Much variability throughout the state in the efficacy of those processes.
- Discussion of DHCD programs and Weatherization
 - Issues identified with existing DHCD programs:
 - Difficult for customers to access (excessive paperwork, unclear results from referrals, lack of transparency in the referral and enrollment process)
 - Many customers are placed on lengthy waiting lists for services. Wait times range from months to years according to some workgroup members familiar with the programs.
 - Very low intake of roughly 2% or eligible customers
 - Workgroup briefly discussed whether existing roles (DHCD, DHS, MDE) make sense to support the Weatherization and Energy Efficiency programs.
 - In other states, weatherization/ energy efficiency programs are administered by the local utility. In MD

- Previously under EUSP OHEP would receive \$1 million to administer weatherization/ energy efficiency programs through their offices. However, this has changed in recent years.

VI. Action Items and Next Meeting

- OHEP will request Denial Rate data from MDTHINK to compare the denial rates of MDTHINK applications with internal OHEP application denial data.
- OHEP to request information from MDTHINK about the average time between user visits.
 - This data would provide context for the workgroup on how users are currently using the MDTHINK consumer portal and insight into how many users abandon their applications prior to 30 days.
- Revised Recommendations approval
- Categorical Eligibility and possible future legislation
 - L. Graziano from DHS will present the workgroup with information about categorical eligibility and changes needed to DHS in order to support the transition to categorical eligibility.
- OHEP to review COMAR to verify if the EUSP regulations require an applicant to be a United States Citizen
 - OHEP response: Yes, COMAR 07.03.22.03 states that, among other criteria, an applicant must be an American citizen, legal immigrant, or qualified alien to receive EUSP benefits.

Next meeting will be Thursday, July 21, 2022 (specific time is TBD)