



Opinion **Dynamics**

Pathways for Limited-English Utility Customers to Navigate a Foreign Energy Landscape

BECC - 2023

11/15/23

Stacia Dreyer, PhD

Opinion Dynamics



Introduction

- Utilities provide essential energy services to a range of customers, not all of whom speak or read English well
- Utilities are expected to provide equal access to their services, but services are not always equitable
- Community-based organizations can play a vital role in promoting equity and helping provide energy related services for limited English proficient (LEP) customers, in partnership with utilities and utility commissions

CHANGES Program

Community Help and Awareness of
Natural Gas and Electricity Services

“CHANGES”



- Takes an innovative approach that addresses existing inequities through a coalition of CBOs
 - Statewide California
 - Budget of \approx \$1.75M
- Potential to replicate this approach in other states
- Opinion Dynamics conducted a process evaluation of the CHANGES Program
 - On behalf of the CPUC and IOUs
 - Publicly available

CHANGES Clients

- Most are not proficient English speakers
 - Spanish, Cantonese, Korean, and Vietnamese are most commonly spoken languages
 - The program also serves English speakers, no language is turned away
- Many are low-income
 - 96% of CHANGES clients are eligible for a utility rate reduction
- 34% are seniors (65 and up)
- Some are recent immigrants, refugees, and/or undocumented people
- All face barriers to resolving energy issues independently

CHANGES Program Overview (2019 – 2021)*

Program Snapshot
Provided services in 44 languages across a network of 27 CBOs
Served 10,831 unique clients via case assistance
Held 5,431 educational events, reaching more than 80,000 clients
Held 215 community outreach events
Conducted 113 media outreach placements

Functional Areas	Program Activity	Share of Program Activity*
Case Assistance	Needs Assistance, Dispute Resolution	72%
Education	Educational Workshops	27%
Outreach	Community Outreach, Media Outreach	2%

* Reported by CBOs, assessed from program tracking data

Pathways for Language Support

- In-language customer support is available to LEP customers through two channels - the IOUs and the CHANGES Program
 - Both channels aim to:
 - help consumers resolve late bills or other disputes
 - enroll in payment plans, and
 - get answers to energy-related questions
- IOUs largely utilize their call center where the LEP customer can be connected to a translator
- CHANGES Program provides hands-on, in-person support via CBOs

CHANGES CBOs

Unique Characteristics of CBOs

- Cultural sensitivity
- Advocacy
- Trust
- Holistic case management

Program Goals Described by CBO Staff

- Educate
- Advocate
- Empower

Educate

- CBOs aim to educate their clients on how to understand their energy bills, recognize overcharges, and prevent disputes
- CBOs aim to educate clients about energy assistance programs

“I believe [CHANGES] is a preventative program for people that don’t know how to read bills, or contracts too. So, we are here to help to lower the bills and prevent them from getting charges that they didn't want or they didn't need.” – CBO interviewee

Advocate

- CBOs advocate for their clients during disputes
 - IOU language line translators are only allowed to translate what they hear, not advocate on behalf of the caller
- CBOs advocate for clients who rely on trusted sources for assistance

“Many of the customers [feel] intimidated by the reps. Many of them [feel] that they weren’t getting their questions answered or they were not getting assistance. And so once we became involved, then *we became their voice* not just to handle that matter, but to teach them to be self-advocates.” - CBO interviewee

Empower

- CBOs empower clients to feel confident handling their energy bills
- CBOs empower clients to be self-advocates

“[We aim to] empower them to be advocates for themselves.” - CBO interviewee

Concluding Thoughts

- CHANGES program helps LEP customers navigate a foreign energy landscape via:
 - Education
 - Advocacy
 - Empowerment
- In doing so, they help utilities, and the commission that regulates them, move towards more equitable service provision
- The CBO approach may work well in other states



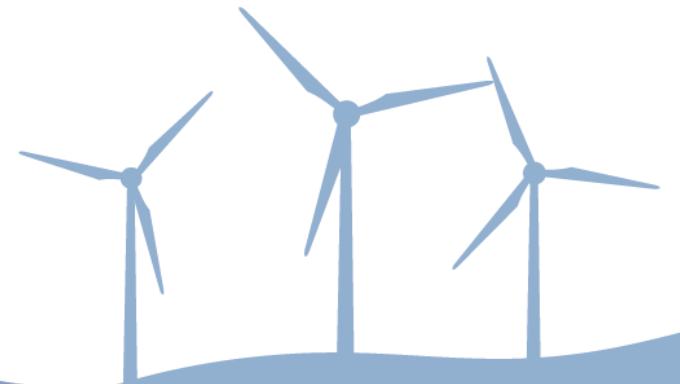


Opinion **Dynamics**

Thank you!

Stacia Dreyer, PhD

sdreyer@opiniondynamics.com



©2023 Opinion Dynamics. All Rights Reserved.

All product or company names that may be mentioned in this publication are tradenames, trademarks, or registered trademarks of their respective owners.