On Wednesday, December 18 the Senate passed a compromise budget bill that was negotiated largely by Republican Representative Paul Ryan and Democratic Senator Patty Murray. Ryan and Murray oversaw a committee that formulated the compromise to pull back most of the automatic spending cuts that were part of sequestration. The agreement will go to President Obama for his signature. The agreement follows a government shutdown in October and a deal which funded the government until January 15. On October 18, David Bradley, Executive Director of the National Community Action Foundation (NCAF) spokeoptimistically that the sequester cuts would be replaced.

Despite the budget deal, it will be up to House and Senate Appropriations Committees to determine how the roughly $1.012 trillion in discretionary dollars will be spent for this year. These decisions will need to be made by January 15 when the current Continuing Resolution is set to expire.

In October, Bradley said that he expected that LIHEAP funding would end up in the $3.4-$3.5 billion range. He believed that Weatherization was “making progress” and that CSBG was in good shape. It is critical that Weatherization maintains its $190 million level. Without this level some states may not be able to maintain the program. Illinois benefits from the transfer of HHS money as well as having State funding – some states are not as fortunate.

David Bradley has also stated recently that he hopes the CSBG Reauthorization Bill will be introduced in the House the week of January 6. Delays have pushed this back several times.
Smart Meters on the Horizon for ComEd, Ameren Customers

In 2011, Illinois passed the Infrastructure Modernization Act which allowed for $3.2 billion in infrastructure upgrades toward the Smart Grid. Included in this process will be the deployment of “smart meters” to be placed on the residencies of homeowners of participating utilities. Commonwealth Edison and Ameren plan to begin this deployment in 2013 and 2014. ComEd has stated that it intends to install 60,000 smart meters in 2013 and a total of 4 million by the year 2021. According to the Citizens Utility Board Ameren will be installing 40,000 meters in Montgomery County in 2014, however, Ameren has not formally communicated this to the LIHEAP network.

The utilities have argued that smart meters will have a positive impact on their companies by lowering costs and improving the information they receive, and customers will receive better service as a result. The meters will allow for utilities to receive communication when power has been lost to an area, thus reducing the time to respond and fix the problem. They will eliminate the need to estimate bills, and they will allow the utilities to provide customers with usage reports.

In general, smart meters will not change anything about the way in which customers interact with their utility or their bill, at least not at first. Utilities will not be able to monitor a customer’s usage of a specific appliance. They do provide the opportunity for optional pricing plans and customers should be careful about this decision. Consumer advocates have expressed concern about privacy issues related to the meters and how the change will affect the rules that are in place to protect customers during the disconnection process, among other things.

As always, local LIHEAP agencies can contact the Citizens Utility Board (CUB) if they have questions. CUB is involved in consumer education efforts regarding smart meters and will be looking into partnering with CEFS Economic Opportunity Corporation in Montgomery County. ComEd has indicated that they are setting up community events in areas where smart meters are being installed and they are particularly interested in educating seniors.

Success Stories/Testimonials

Every day the 35 local agencies that operate both the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and the Weatherization Assistance Program produce inspiring success stories that benefit families with low incomes.

Submitted by Embarras River Basin Agency

An Embarras River Basin Agency employee assisted a very nice family with two children with a LIHEAP and a Weatherization application in Douglas County. The Mom and Dad were both working at Wal-Mart in Mattoon when the Dad was hurt on the job, so he has been off work for a long time. His workman’s comp has been depleted and he is in the process of applying for Social Security Disability. They are new clients of ours so they did not know much about the places they could go for assistance. While completing the LIHEAP application the Mom stated that she was so thankful for the assistance because it is very scary suddenly going from two incomes to one. She was so excited now that she will not have to worry about paying the utility bill. She told me that she is so glad she finally took the nerve to call for help because she was embarrassed to make that initial call. But now that she did she said that she feels so much better.

Quote from a PIPP customer from the Sangamon County Department of Community Resources:

…”it relieves stress, because I know what I’m paying and it helps me pay more on CWLP”, “I can purchase a few more presents for my children”

IACAA Needs Your Help! Please send your agency’s LIHEAP and Weatherization success stories and/or customer letters of thanks for the past year.
University of Illinois at Springfield on Board For PIPP Report

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity has contracted with the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) to analyze Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) data and provide a report on the program’s level of success. According to Senate Bill 1918, the legislation that established a PIPP for Illinois beginning in 2011, the State is required to produce an annual report on the progress of the program. Producing the report has been difficult because gaining access to information on STARS is a challenge.

The report will try to focus on measuring and evaluating the goals of the program. Those goals include improving the affordability of home energy for low income customers, providing incentives to increase timely payments, and identifying high energy users and referring customers to Weatherization. The PIPP Annual Report Committee, along with DCEO and UIS, has continued to discuss what information is available and how the report will be structured. It is likely that the first report will be limited due to the limitations of the STARS system at this time. Future reports should be more extensive.

Percentage of Income Payment Plan Will End December 31

The Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) announced that intake for the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) would conclude on December 31. The PIPP Business Rules allows for the program to be halted at the discretion of DCEO at the end of the calendar year. The stopping of taking additional applications was announced, according to DCEO, because the local administering agencies had reached their goal of increasing enrollment by 10% from last year’s highest number. Furthermore, agencies have had trouble maintaining the capacity to keep up with the additional numbers. While the program has generally operated smoothly, agencies have had difficulty with the intervention process, which involves manually tracking and contacting customers who are late on their payments. Once the STARS system is completely automated, this process should be easier.

As of December 12, local agencies have increased the number of PIPP customers by 11% over last year’s numbers for a total of 58,476. Since September, only 5% of PIPP customers have been dropped from the program for reasons such as failure to maintain payments or moving out of the area. Customers who are unable to sign up for the PIPP program will still be offered a Direct Vendor Payment (DVP), which to date has provided benefits to over 140,000 households state-wide since September.