

# Columbus Utilities Directors Update – 8/15/2024

## Past Month

### Electric:

- Outages and other repairs have been made
- Highway K conversion work
- Assisted Director on CIP
- Lineman School has started

### Water:

- Plant #1 Overflow project is nearing completion
- The reservoir was fully drained for the work on the Overflow yet filled with Groundwater. Groundwater will be tested and the Reservoir Inspected
- State DNR Testing 3
- Hydrants are being flushed
- Hydrants are being sandblasted and repainted
- R-M is working with the Utility on providing a comprehensive CIP for the city and the stability of the Water Utility

### Sewer:

- Clarifier Deck work is complete
- Plant septage receiving has been reduced to a total of 2 hours per day during the week.
- The plant has seen drastic improvement in its performance over the past month.
- A change in the injection position of the Phosphorus treatment chemical hyper Ion has seen a marked improvement in our ortho-phosphorus values.
- The hanger was completely emptied.
- We have modified our operating procedure of our Aerobic Digesters in an effort to maximize volume reduction in conjunction with the enzyme addition.
- WWTP Staff and the Director met with R-M, the city of Mukwonago, and two vendors who pitched their dewatering equipment capabilities.
- We are developing the CIP and should be finished for budgeting here soon.

## Upcoming Month

### Electric:

- Finish up on projects that have been on the back burner over summer.
- Inventory check and replenishment
- Verify PPE and all Safety Equipment is job ready.

### Water:

- Identify the issue with Reservoir #1 and prepare for repairs.
- Complete DNR required inspection of Reservoir #1
- Continue Hydrant Flushing
- Continue Hydrant Painting

- State DNR testing
- Complete CIP and Budget for 2025

Sewer:

- Continue to get the plant in an optimized state.
- Open the plant to septage receiving “business as normal” hopefully!
- Work with R-M and staff to prepare a pretreatment Program and FOG monitoring program.
- Prepare a Rate case for collection system users.
- Prepare Rate case for septage haulers based on concentrations and impact on plant health.

Utility Overall:

- Complete Budget
- Interview candidates for WWTP Operator B position
- Work through budget and department job descriptions and determine required staffing needs.

# LIVELines

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## Extreme weather is timely reminder of crucial storm prep

**T**hey say everything is bigger in Texas. After the first significant hurricane of 2024 caused damage in southeast Texas, one of the state's largest utilities is facing big questions about how they planned for and responded to the storm. The glaring spotlight that's shining on CenterPoint Energy, an investor-owned utility (IOU) based in Houston, is a reminder to all utility operators about how important it is to prepare for Mother Nature's wrath.

More than 2.7 million households and businesses lost power as Hurricane Beryl's 80-mile-per-hour winds struck Houston on July 8, including 2.2 million served by CenterPoint Energy. The massive and sustained power outages caused significant disruption and frustration, as Texans criticized the company for failing to restore service in a more timely way.

The damage from Beryl impacted both CenterPoint Energy's infrastructure and customer-owned equipment. Heavy winds caused extensive damage, downing trees and electricity poles, and

creating hazardous conditions. CenterPoint Energy's effort to mobilize thousands of resources, including more than 11,000 workers, to expedite the restoration process was no match for the powerful storm.

In the weeks following the hurricane, the frustration among Houstonians was evident. And that frustration

was, at times, misdirected toward utility workers, with one reported incident of a man holding a line worker at gunpoint. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called for a thorough investigation by the state's Public Utility Commission (PUC) into CenterPoint Energy's preparedness and response, threatening to issue an executive order if satisfactory answers are not provided. The utility defended its readiness and the pace of electricity restoration, which they said was faster than in previous storms.



AP Photo

At least 22 people died in the Houston area due to damages caused by Beryl, including three who were struck by falling trees, and two that drowned in floodwaters. Heat-related illnesses due to power outages also claimed seven lives, as

residents struggled without air conditioning amid temperatures soaring

above 100°F.

CenterPoint Energy's annual reporting has indicated aging infrastructure, which may have contributed to the scale of the outages. The company's Outage Tracker, which went offline in May 2024 due to a derecho, remained down after Beryl struck, leaving customers without a clear way to gauge when power would return. Many reported they were forced to rely on location services from a fast-food restaurant's mobile app to determine the areas that still had power.

The combination of power outages and extreme heat created dangerous conditions in eastern Texas. The National Weather Service issued a heat advisory, warning that heat indexes could reach 106°F, posing significant health risks. Power outages also led to widespread food spoilage and food shortages, with food banks working to distribute supplies to underserved areas. Many residents endured long lines at gas stations for generator fuel and at facilities with air conditioning. Nearly 30% of cell sites in the Houston area were not working.

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Officials appealed to residents not to direct their frustration toward utility workers. CenterPoint Energy appealed to customers for patience and understanding as it navigated the complexities of the restoration process. The company acknowledged the need for improved communication and preparedness and said it is dedicated to learning from this experience and implementing necessary changes to better serve its customers in the future.

Municipal utilities in Texas fared better than the IOUs during the recent hurricane, according to Taylor Kilroy, Executive Director of Texas Public Power Association. “We have been extraordinarily lucky,” he acknowledged. Due to the storm’s path, mainly IOUs and some co-ops were directly impacted. “There were some municipal utility customer outages in east Texas on the back edge of the storm, but we deployed mutual aid and got everyone back online quickly.”

As in Wisconsin, Texas utilities serve designated jurisdictions. The PUC of Texas regulates electricity and oversees utilities. Regulators often prefer companies spend money repairing damage rather than sending it to the state as a fine. Regulators also could require CenterPoint to put money into strengthening its infrastructure. •

## Commission staff renew approach to recovering MEUW membership dues



The Public Service Commission (PSC) has historically allowed Wisconsin utilities to recover a portion of association dues as part of their revenue requirement, to the extent that the activities of an association — including MEUW — provide a benefit to customers. Historically, the PSC has authorized recovery of 75% of MEUW dues to account for the portion of activities that could reasonably be considered to provide a customer benefit. In two recent municipal utility rate case proceedings, Commission staff initially proposed removing all association memberships and dues, and requested justification and support identifying the benefits.

Cedarburg Light & Water (CL&W) was the first municipal utility to address the matter and provided [information](#) to support the recovery of some or all of the dues. In its final order for the CL&W [electric rate case](#), the Commission found that “it is reasonable, to continue its historic allowance for recovery of dues of 75 percent.”



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## LIVELines

Official monthly publication of **Municipal Electric Utilities of Wisconsin, Inc.**, the statewide trade association representing the interests of Wisconsin's public power providers since 1928.

This e-newsletter is distributed to more than 1,200 utility professionals and leaders throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest on the first Tuesday of every month.

*LIVE LINES* has been published continuously for many decades and provides useful information, news on emerging utility issues and legislation, updates on events, training programs and member services, as well as engaging feature stories spotlighting utilities, communities and leaders.

Reader comments and suggestions are welcome — send by email to [news@meuw.org](mailto:news@meuw.org)

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An archive of past issues of *Live Lines* is available at [www.issuu.com/meuw](http://www.issuu.com/meuw)

## Wisconsin well represented at APPA “fly-in”

The American Public Power Association (APPA) Policy Makers Council (PMC) met in Washington, D.C. in July. Wisconsin has four representatives on the 40-person PMC. Local utility commissioners Lee Meyerhofer (Kaukauna) and Andy Moss (Cedarburg) attended the PMC meeting, where Meyerhofer took the gavel as Chair of the PMC for the next year. Other PMC members from Wisconsin, Jim Brooks (Evansville) and Mike Eberl (Marshfield), were unable to attend.

In addition to attending the PMC meeting, members took advantage of the time to meet with Congressional representatives for a “mini legislative fly-in.” Along with MEUW Director of Legislative and Regulatory Relations Tyler Vorpapel and Joseph Owen, WPPI Energy Director of Government Affairs, Meyerhofer and Moss met with Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Representatives Mark Pocan (WI-2), and Glenn Grothman (WI-6), and staff from the offices of Sen. Ron Johnson and Rep. Tom Tiffany (WI-7).



The visit to D.C. included a meeting with Wisconsin 2nd District Rep. Mark Pocan (at left) to discuss issues important to public power.

The meetings with Wisconsin's federal lawmakers continued advocacy on a number of topics, including help to ease ongoing supply chain challenges and to pass energy permitting reform to streamline siting rules that often delay projects and drive up customer rates. There was also discussion of tax issues that public power would like to see in the next congressional tax package, including parity with IOUs for energy tax credits, and highlighting the onerous and burdensome Treasury Department rules that public power communities are required to follow in order to receive those credits. The group also asked for Congress to increase the smaller-issuer exemption to \$30 million (up from \$10 million) and index it to inflation so public power infrastructure projects can be financed by local financial institutions. Finally, the group explained that public power utilities nationwide are committed to diversifying their power-generation resource mix and reducing their CO2 emissions — actions that have led to a 31% reduction from 2005 to 2022. •

## Sun Prairie breaks ground on new utility facility

After more than 50 years downtown, Sun Prairie Utilities (SPU) has broken ground for a new facility that will be located across from its current storage yard. Utility officials celebrated the milestone in July (at right, SPU's Utility Manager Rick Wicklund is shown at the ground-breaking ceremony). The new facility, which is expected to open in late 2025, will be all-electric, and include electric vehicle charging, enhanced security, improved energy efficiency, geothermal HVAC, rooftop solar, and a large community room. SPU hopes the project will achieve LEED Gold Certification. Additional details are available at [sunprairieutilities.com/new-facility](http://sunprairieutilities.com/new-facility).



## MEUW Safety & Education Committee chooses leaders, adds new members

Over the years, worker safety has become a core service MEUW offers its members. Guiding the association's efforts to keep safety top of mind among all municipal electric employees is the Safety & Education (S&E) Committee comprised of 11 individuals representing the diverse needs of MEUW member utilities.



Gald



McLain



Dellemann

Members of the S&E Committee recently chose Scott Gald, Electric Superintendent in Richland Center, as Chair for the next year. John McLain, Electric Superintendent at Waunakee Utilities, was chosen as Vice Chair, and Brian Dellemann, Two Rivers Utilities' Electric Utility Director, is the Committee's Secretary. Also, after three committee members chose not to renew their seats, MEUW put out a call for individuals interested in being considered for service. As a result, Ryan Pelowski, Lead Lineman at Trempealeau Municipal Utilities, Jordan Schmitz, Electric Superintendent at Mount Horeb Utilities, and Owen Vande Kolk, Assistant Electric Operations Supervisor at Waupun Utilities, were chosen to join the S&E Committee.

"We are fortunate to have an active and engaged group of individuals who give their time and expertise to help MEUW deliver the type of safety program that our members demand," said MEUW Director of Safety

Services and Operations Mike Czuprynski. He added, "We are always interested in member feedback which only helps to make the program stronger." To provide input, contact Mike at (608) 478-2530, or S&E Committee Chair Scott Gald at (608) 647-2434, or any member of the S&E Committee. ●

## Next management training course set for Oct. 9 in Mauston

Build and enhance your knowledge of Utility Accounting & Finance, the next course in our four-part [Fundamentals of Utility Management](#) training Series. Understanding the various financial aspects associated with utility operations is essential. This course is designed to provide attendees with the fundamentals of public utility accounting, a clear understanding of business operations, how to review and effectively manage budgets, as well as a base-level knowledge of utility regulations.

Led by Baker Tilly Partner Jodi Dobson, CPA, this course is designed for municipal workers of all skill levels and backgrounds. It is intended as a foundation for understanding the public power industry and is especially helpful for those new to the industry or those who aspire to expanded responsibilities.

The course will be held Wednesday, Oct. 9, in Mauston. Registration and details on the course are available [here](#).



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## In Memoriam



**Chris Danielson**, Superintendent of the Village of Merrilan Electric Light & Water Department, passed away unexpectedly July 1, at the age of 34. Chris began working for the Village in 2019. The full obituary is [here](#).



**Jem Brown**, General Manager of Wisconsin Rapids Water Works and Lighting Commission (WRWW&LC), passed July 25 after a brief illness. He was 60 years old. Jem was a long-time member of MEUW's Board of Directors and served as Board President in 2014-15. He was currently serving a two-year term as an At-large Director. He also served as Board Chair for Great Lakes Utilities. He joined WRWW&LC in 2008. The full obituary can be found [here](#).

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# Role as “point of beginning” adds to making Hazel Green special

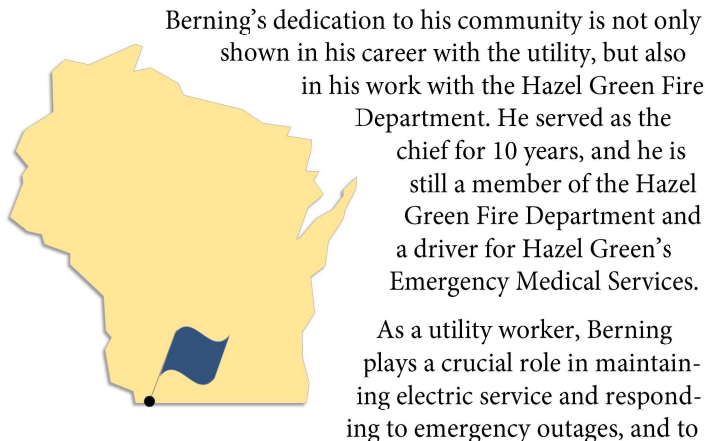


Hazel Green, population 1,200, is a beautiful village in Southwestern Wisconsin that spans across two counties: Grant and Lafayette. It's located just north of the Illinois border, not far from the popular tourist town of Galena, Ill., and nine miles from the Mississippi River.

Since 1908, Hazel Green has operated its own utilities, providing residents with electric, water, and sewer services. The electric utility serves about 553 residential customers and 94 commercial customers.

John Berning, Director of Public Works, has been working for the Village of Hazel Green for 32 years. “I’ve lived in Hazel Green for my entire life,” Berning said. “It’s a close-knit, caring community, and I’m proud to be a part of it.”

The village has a staff of six, but most of the electric work is handled by Berning and Lineman Robert “Bo” Brunkow. Berning said that he expects Brunkow, who has been with the utility for more than seven years, to take over his position when he retires.



Berning’s dedication to his community is not only shown in his career with the utility, but also in his work with the Hazel Green Fire Department. He served as the chief for 10 years, and he is still a member of the Hazel Green Fire Department and a driver for Hazel Green’s Emergency Medical Services.

As a utility worker, Berning plays a crucial role in maintaining electric service and responding to emergency outages, and to

other emergency situations as a volunteer firefighter. “There is some crossover in what I do,” Berning said. “When we are working on an electric outage, one of my first calls is to the fire department as they help to manage traffic and protect citizens during outages. It’s a small town, and we all pitch in to look out for each other.”

Berning said he knows the town so well he doesn’t even need an address to find a location. “When I respond to a call, I always ask for the family’s name,” Berning said. “It’s easier for me to find a place by who lives there than by a number.”

## The Point of Beginning

Like many cities in Southwestern Wisconsin, Hazel Green has a long history that’s tied to lead mining. In 1825, lead miners ven-

tured out of Galena and established a new settlement called “Hardscrabble,” which reflects the difficulties and struggles of the life of a miner.

The town was eventually renamed Hazel Green, supposedly after a big grove of hazelnut trees near the mining site. “Today some see Hazel Green as a bedroom community, just a short drive from Dubuque or Galena,” Berning said. “It’s a great community with lots of scenic beauty and a good school district; it’s a nice place to call home.”



Hazel Green is probably most known for being the “Point of Beginning” (POB) for the state of Wisconsin. The POB is the starting point for Wisconsin’s entire survey system.

Back in 1831, land surveyors used this point near what eventually became Hazel Green to create a grid system for dividing land. This system helped establish property boundaries and land ownership across the state. Today, every property deed in Wisconsin still includes a description based on the POB in Hazel Green. The spot is marked with a roadside sign just south of town.

“Being the point of beginning is what encourages some to visit,” Berning said. “It gives Hazel Green a solid place in Wisconsin’s history.”

## Hazel Green Attracts New Residents

Hazel Green’s Deputy Clerk Sonia Burkholder said the community is growing slowly. She noted there is one house currently being built, and the village usually adds a couple of residential customers each year.

Berning added, “Houses don’t stay on the market long, as soon as they go up for sale, they are snapped up quickly.”

Several of Hazel Green’s large power customers are agricultural customers in the feed mill industry. Another large customer is the Southwestern Wisconsin School District, which serves Hazel Green and the surrounding areas including Jamestown, Sinsinawa, and Kieler.

The school district is a source of pride for the community. “Our schools are always rated highly and offer a lot for our young people,” Berning said.

## Utility Benefits from Training and Mutual Aid

Hazel Green purchases its power from Alliant Energy, the investor-owned utility serving much of the surrounding area.

Berning said that both he and Brunkow have benefited from MEUW’s safety training and programs. “These trainings provide the opportunity for us to share insights and advice, so we can learn from each other’s experiences,” Berning said.

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He also stressed that Hazel Green relies heavily on Cuba City, Shullsburg, and Benton during emergencies, “We couldn’t do what we do without the mutual aid arrangements we have with these three communities,” Berning said. “We have a long tradition of helping each other with restoration. These relationships are key to our success as public power companies. It’s also critical to restoring power and meeting our customers’ needs as quickly as possible.”



The team is busy this summer with several big projects. Burkholder noted that a Dollar General is going up in town, and the team is busy helping with the project. Additionally, the Department of Transportation

is redoing the corner of Highways 80 and 11, and the electric crew has been working to move primary power underground.

### Hazel Green to Celebrate its 200th Anniversary

If visiting Hazel Green this summer, after seeing the POB site, be sure to visit the Hazel Green Opera House and take in an original puppet show featuring handmade puppets and marionettes. There are also many antique stores to explore and several fun restaurants, including Gangster’s Bar & Grill and Bar Tell 2.

Berning noted that the best time to visit is during the annual “Tunes and Booms” festival in the village. Tunes and Booms combines music and fireworks and is held on a night before the Fourth of July. “People from all over the area come together to enjoy the festivities,” Berning said. “It’s a chance for neighbors, friends, and families to celebrate and have a great time.”



Residents in the Village of Hazel Green benefit from the service of municipal employees shown above. They include (back row, from left) Jim Monahan, Police Chief; Bo Brunkow, Lineman; David Sweet, Water Operator; Sally Bauer, Clerk/Treasurer; Sonia Burkholder, Deputy/Utility Clerk; John Berning, Director of Public Works and Lineman; (kneeling in front) Brian Reuter, Sewer Operator; and Mike Dunbar (who recently retired after 47 years).

Burkholder said that community organizers are planning to hold an even bigger Tunes and Booms celebration in 2025 to mark its 200th anniversary as a Village.


Berning added that the village is now recruiting additional volunteers to be committee members for the event. “We have a great committee because this town is full of people who care and are willing to work hard for Hazel Green. We’re happy to provide support and work right alongside them.” ●

### Helgestad to mark MEUW employment milestone



Senior Regional Safety Coordinator **Jeff Helgestad** is celebrating 15 years of service to MEUW and its members this month. Jeff provides safety services and support to municipal utilities in six communities, including Columbus,

Hustisford, Elroy, New Lisbon, Oconomowoc, and Waunakee. He first joined MEUW on Aug. 24, 2009.



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# MEUW NEWS Monitor

## Share your input about governance training:

Effective governance of municipal electric utilities matters, and it is important to understand the accountabilities and roles of the governing body and those involved in managing the day-to-day operations. In response to member feedback, MEUW is developing a training program that will specifically address the governance challenges and the pros and cons of different models. Please take a minute to complete a [survey](#) to help us structure a program that will most effectively meet members' needs.

**Join MEUW strategy session:** The MEUW Board of Directors is meeting in Mauston on Aug. 27 to identify and review future trends and outside influences important to the electric utility industry. This information, along with a review of the association's long-term strategic plan adopted in 2019, will lead to planning on how MEUW can strategically address member needs into the future. All members are welcome to attend and participate. There is no cost, but [advance registration](#) is required.

## Learn and network at Accounting and Customer Service seminar

**Sept. 25:** Participate in this annual seminar, bringing together municipal electric utility staff to provide updates

on regulatory and legislative issues that affect their utilities and provide best practices to improve their operations. Join members from utilities across the state in Mauston on Sept. 25 to learn and network, and discuss leading practices and timely topics. Planned agenda items include updates from the PSC, grant writing, landlord communications, records retention and audit requirements, as well as techniques to de-escalate tense customer situations. Registration information is [here](#).

## Stored energy and chainsaw workshops planned in October:

Stored energy in trees represents a significant danger for line workers. Understanding the dynamics of stored energy, and how to safely work with and around it, is critical for every line worker. This workshop will cover how to recognize stored energy, and how to control and mitigate it when working at trees with chainsaws. Two dates and locations are available to choose from: Wednesday, Oct. 2 in [Black River Falls](#), or Thursday, Oct. 3 in [Prairie du Sac](#). Registration is now open.

## Don't be caught off-guard by HR issues:

Human Resources (HR) issues can be complex and difficult to navigate. Recruiting, training, ensuring compensation and benefits, and em-

ployee engagement all in the context of complying with ever-changing federal, state and local employment laws — it's a lot to keep track of. Led by experts from the Boardman & Clark law firm, the Oct. 1 session is a valuable refresher for HR issues, as well as provide guidance to comply with evolving employment laws. Additional information and registration are available [here](#).

## "District Dialogue" luncheons planned for October:

MEUW is hosting a series of "District Dialogue" meetings to get members together, provide updates about what's happening, and engage in roundtable discussions about topics important to them. The luncheons will be held in five communities around Wisconsin. Planned sites and dates are:

- Thurs., Oct. 3 — Richland Center
- Tues., Oct. 15 — Shawano
- Thurs., Oct. 17 — Rice Lake
- Tues., Oct. 22 — Lake Mills
- Tues., Oct. 29 — Black River Falls

There is no cost to attend, but pre-registration is required. Each session will begin at 10 a.m. and wrap up after lunch by about 1 p.m. Watch for sign-up details soon.



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## Focus on Energy exploring opportunities for underserved

During the Public Service Commission's planning process in 2022 that set four-year priorities and goals for the Focus on Energy Program, Commissioners emphasized enhancing program services to low-income populations and other underserved utility customers with historically limited levels of Focus participation. The Commission directed Focus's program administrator to explore community-based pilot programs, coordinating with the state's low-income weatherization program, and developing strategies to reduce barriers in marginalized communities. Additionally, the Commission asked for an analysis to help identify underserved customers and develop key performance indicators (KPIs) for the Focus program.

The analysis presented to the Commission offered a data-driven framework to enhance Focus on Energy access for program-eligible Wisconsin communities. The framework identifies underserved customers and locates communities with low Focus activity. It builds on previous efforts addressing barriers for income-qualified, rural, and small business customers.

Areas of the state with lower proportional shares of Focus participation, incentives, and energy savings, combined with higher proportional share of high energy burden and low- and moderate-income populations are identified in the analysis as *Communities of Focus*. These communities account for a quarter of Wisconsin households but received only 20 percent of Focus activity in the past five years, indicating underservice.

At its July 18 Open Meeting, the Commission concurred with the proposed framework, requesting further refinement to more accurately identify populations of the state served by electric cooperatives that do not participate in Focus on Energy.

The Commission also established new KPIs for the Focus program to achieve over the next two years that reflect an emphasis on historically underserved customers. One KPI sets a target to increase the energy savings occurring in the *Communities of Focus* census tracts by five percent by the end of 2026 over the 2023 savings baseline. The second KPI directs Focus to partner with a minimum of three community-based organizations in an underserved *Communities of Focus* area to spread awareness and cultivate an understanding of the energy programs.

## LIVELines Classifieds

MEUW is pleased to promote job openings with its member utilities across Wisconsin. New positions are regularly added to our website — check them out [here](#).

When your utility is hiring, be sure to email the job posting to [office@meuw.org](mailto:office@meuw.org).

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While Focus on Energy incentives and resources are available to every customer of municipal electric utilities, investor-owned utilities, and participating electric cooperatives, there are a variety of barriers that can make it difficult for some to take advantage of what Focus offers. Knowing who those customers are and understanding the challenges they face in participating are critical to designing program elements that expand access to Focus on Energy.

More information about the Commission's decision and the underserved research and analysis provided by the Focus program administrator is available in PSC Docket 5-FE-104 and can be accessed through agency's [Electronic Filing System](#). ●

MEUW provides Focus on Energy the opportunity to regularly contribute content to LIVE LINES because of the organizations' shared support of municipal utilities.