January 21, 2010 **Utilities: Cost Saving Programs/Solutions for People on Fixed Incomes.**

Speakers:

- Michelle Lehman, APS Limited Income Programs Director
- Bonnie Temme, SRP Limited Income Assistance Program Director
- Norma Gutierrez, SW Gash Vice President
- Kathryn Sorenson, City of Phoenix Water Director
- Maria Sherfield, Tucson Electric Power (TEP) and Customer Care Supervisor
- Dora Vazquez, Director of AZ Alliance for Retired Americans
- Cynthia Zwick, Executive Director of Wildfire

For this information-packed discussion we had representatives from APS, SRP, SW Gas, City of Phoenix Water, Tucson Electric Power (TEP), Arizona Alliance for Retired Americans and Wildfire. Each of the power suppliers detailed their bill discount and assistance programs – which were very similar. All companies require the customer to provide a SNAP card, showing that they qualify for food assistance or documentation demonstrating that their income is 150-200% of the federal poverty guidelines. Each company has “medically fragile household” and “safety net” programs, which prevent discontinued power if the bill is not paid on time but require the customer to register within their company’s system. And each power company has a dedicated customer service phone line with trained counselors to assist customers and community partners for wellness checks and social services assistance.

Arizona Alliance of Retired Americans representative Dora started her talk by saying “If aging isn’t your issue – it will be.” Truer words…. She reminded us that the average state retirement payout is $20K annually, just slightly over the threshold that would make a retiree eligible for the power company’s discount programs. Nonprofit Wildfire is an AARP partner and works with 30+ organizations to provide low income assistance through the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

When it came time for questions the Firefighters again stepped up with great questions, asking how emergency responders could contact the power companies directly if they arrived at a house where the power had been turned off or equipment was not working. Unfortunately, no
representative rallied with a good answer. Another question pertained to data collection; why weren’t the power companies pro-actively asking customers for personal information that would help them qualify customers for discount programs and a medically fragile classification? The power companies all responded that they were cognizant of privacy issues and it was their policy not to ask. That said, all power company representatives acknowledged that there is low program participation due to poor communication.

References:

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program: [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/liheap](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/liheap)


Arizona Alliance for Retired Americans: [https://arizona.retiredamericans.org/](https://arizona.retiredamericans.org/)