



**CARES Advisory Group Meeting Agenda**  
**February 18, 2026 2:00 – 3:00pm Pacific**

<b>Advisory Group Member</b>	
Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC)	Sylvia Schaefer
Benton-Franklin Community Action Connections (CAC)	Dalia Ochoa
Community Action of Lewis, Mason, & Thurston Counties (CACLMT)	Ester Castro, Stephenie Arnold
Coastal Community Action Program (CCAP)	Debbie Gregg
Chelan-Douglas Community Action Council (CDCAC)	Tom Bonwell, Sarah Brito, Alan Walker
Kitsap Community Resources (KCR)	Kandi Balandran
Lower Columbia Community Action Center (LCCAP)	Kathy Bates
NW Community Action Center (NCAC)	Jose Alvarez
OIC of Washington (OIC)	Heidi Silva, Casandra Ochoa, Candi Jaeger
Opportunity Council (OPPCO)	Marie Stanley, Melissa Gong
Community Action of Skagit County (SCCAA)	Misty Velasquez
Snohomish County Human Services Dept (SCEAP)	Constance Hockett, Traci Baugh
WUTC Staff	Andrew Roberts, Andy Sellards, Corey Cook, Jacque Hawkins-Jones, Keith Quinata
The Energy Project	Shaylee Stokes
Public Counsel	Kai Hiatt
NW Energy Coalition	Charlee Thompson
Department of Commerce	Michelle DeBell
<b>Cascade Natural Gas</b>	
Dan Tillis, Dir Customer Experience	Jennifer Gross, Regulatory Affairs Mgr
Teri Sovak, Mgr Customer Service, Credit & Collections	Noemi Ortiz, Mgr Energy Efficiency & Conservation
Shannon Steed, Consumer Specialist	Rodney Fowler, Business Analyst

1. CARES enrollment update (Dan)
2. CARES Annual Report Update (Jennifer)
3. Open Discussion

Meeting notes:

- **Bill Discount Enrollment Data Overview:** Dan provided an update on bill discount enrollment, noting an increase of 333 net new enrollments in January, with 19,123 accounts receiving a discount, representing about 32% of the estimated low-income customer base based on the current assessment.
  -
- **Cascade CARES Annual Report Review:** Jennifer led a comprehensive walkthrough of the Cascade CARES annual report for the 2024-2025 program year, highlighting program growth,

delivery improvements, demographic insights, financial breakdowns, and collaborative efforts, with contributions and clarifications from Rodney, Dan, and other team members.

- **Program Growth and Enrollment:** Jennifer reported that the program year began with 6,320 enrolled customers and ended with 17,245, increasing program penetration from 11% to 29%. This growth was attributed to collaborative efforts and program improvements.
- **Program Delivery Improvements:** Key delivery improvements included auto-enrollment of 4,994 likely low-income customers in December 2024, enhancements to the Assist system (the online platform for agency enrollments), revised agency remuneration to \$75 per touchpoint, and the removal of a provision that paused discounts for accounts with large LIHEAP credit balances.
- **Post-Enrollment Verification (PEV) Changes:** The PEV process was revised to include categorical eligibility screening, allowing customers receiving benefits from programs with similar income guidelines (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid) to be automatically verified, aiming to reduce barriers for vulnerable customers.
- **Multi-Year Rate Plan Adjustments:** Cascade filed a multi-year rate plan resulting in an 8.04% overall rate increase, and subsequently adjusted discount rates for Tiers 2, 3, and 4 to ensure energy burdens remained at or below 3.1% (2.8% for Tier 5), as detailed in the compliance filing.
- **Settlement Commitments and Language Access:** Cascade committed to presenting credit and collection practices and developing a language access plan, with several recommendations already implemented, such as improved communication materials and website accessibility features.
- **CBO Pilot and Outreach Efforts:** The Community-Based Organization (CBO) pilot continued, with agencies employing various outreach strategies tailored to their regions. Major outreach efforts included multi-channel communications such as bill inserts, emails, social media, and partnerships with organizations like Inspire Development Centers.
- **Demographic Insights:** Jennifer and Rodney presented demographic data, noting concentrations of CARES recipients in specific Washington counties, a majority of Caucasian recipients with Hispanic customers as the largest minority, a predominance of women, a significant portion of seniors, and a mix of employment statuses. Most recipients live in older, owner-occupied single-family homes.
- **Financial and Programmatic Data:** The report detailed total spending of \$6.73 million (a \$4.58 million increase from the prior year), with breakdowns for discounts, grants, program delivery, agency fees, and the CBO pilot. Tables summarized average discounts, grants, and customer touchpoints by tier and agency.
- **Year-over-Year Comparison:** A comparison between the first and second program years showed an increase from 6,320 to 17,245 customers served and a rise in spending from \$2.1 million to \$6.7 million, reflecting expanded program reach and impact.
- **Data Analysis Tools:** Rodney demonstrated an Excel-based dashboard for demographic analysis, explaining the use of pivot tables and slicers to explore self-reported demographic data, and clarified that the demographic data presented pertained only to enrolled CARES customers.
- **Flood Recovery and Customer Assistance in Skagit and Whatcom Counties:** Shaylee Stokes inquired about Cascade's involvement in flood recovery efforts in the Skagit area, with Dan, Sheila, and Melissa Gong providing updates on utility operations, weatherization, and bill assistance activities, particularly in Whatcom County.

- **Utility Operations and Financial Assistance:** Dan stated that Cascade has been involved in operational recovery, such as replacing meters and restoring normal service, but was not aware of specific financial assistance programs related to flood recovery.
- **Weatherization Program Uptake:** Sheila reported increased participation in non-income qualified weatherization programs for remediation of flood-damaged insulation, but noted limited information on the income-assisted side, as most work is completed through agencies.
- **Agency and Community Response:** Melissa Gong described active participation in a flood response network in Whatcom County, collaboration with the long-term recovery group, provision of bill assistance and wood for heating, allocation of additional repair slots for LIHEAP-eligible households, and ongoing outreach to affected communities, including those hesitant to access federal programs.
- **NEUAC Annual Conference Participation:** Shaylee Stokes informed the group about the upcoming NEUAC annual conference in Seattle, discussed the planning process, and encouraged Cascade and other participants to consider attending. Melissa Gong mentioned that the hotel block was open for booking, and Shaylee clarified that while registration was not yet open, attendees could pre-book rooms if they planned to attend.