



CARES Advisory Group Meeting Agenda
August 19, 2026 2:00 – 3:00pm Pacific

Advisory Group Member	
Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC)	Sylvia Schaefer, Judith Gidley
Benton-Franklin Community Action Connections (CAC)	Dalia Ochoa
Community Action of Lewis, Mason, & Thurston Counties (CACLMT)	Ester Castro, Mar Cuellar, Esmeralda Triplett, Jazmin Maldonado
Coastal Community Action Program (CCAP)	Debbie Gregg, Craig Dublanko
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, Ilona Kirby
NW Community Action Center (NCAC)	Jose Alvarez, Cristal Reyes, Lisa Campbell-John
OIC of Washington (OIC)	Heidi Silva, Casandra Ochoa, Candi Jaeger, Frank Martinez, Anthony Peterson
Opportunity Council (OPPCO)	Marie Stanley, Melissa Gong, Greg Winter, Jen Rightsell, Jonathan Sharp
Community Action of Skagit County (SCCAA)	Misty Velasquez, Bill Henkel
Snohomish County Human Services Dept (SCEAP)	Constance Hockett, Traci Baugh, Matthew Bell
WUTC Staff	Andrew Roberts, Andy Sellards, Jacque Hawkins-Jones, Keith Quinata, Heather Moline, Lisa Gafken, Sylvanna Sorrells
The Energy Project	Shaylee Stokes, Yochi Zakai
Public Counsel	Kai Hiatt
NW Energy Coalition	Charlee Thompson
Department of Commerce	Michelle DeBell
Cascade Natural Gas	
Dan Tillis, Dir Customer Experience	Jennifer Gross, Regulatory Affairs Mgr
Teri Sovak, Mgr Customer Service, Credit & Collections	Arabella Blomstedt, Regulatory Analyst
Shannon Steed, Consumer Specialist	Noemi Ortiz, Mgr Energy Efficiency & Conservation
Rodney Fowler, Business Analyst	Luisa Perez, Energy Efficiency Analyst

1. CARES enrollment update (Jennifer)
2. CARES filing update (Jennifer)
3. Open Discussion

Meeting notes:

- **CARES Program Enrollment Updates:** Jennifer provided the team with updated CARES monthly enrollment statistics, highlighting steady program penetration and discussing the slight decline in total customers due to account closures and end-of-term cases.

- **Enrollment Statistics Overview:** Jennifer shared two tables in the chat: one showing enrollments through July by tier and low-income penetration, and another showing month-over-month enrollments per tier, noting 84% penetration in tier one and a total of 20,787 customers enrolled at the end of July.
 - **Decline in Customer Numbers:** Rodney Fowler analyzed the slight three-person decline in CARES enrollments, attributing it primarily to account closures from customers moving and about 20% due to end-of-term cases, not disconnections for non-payment.
 - **Steady Program Performance:** Jennifer emphasized that overall program enrollment remains steady, with no significant fluctuations, and the team finds monthly tracking useful for monitoring progress.
- **CARES Advice Filing and Tariff Changes:** Jennifer updated the group on the recent CARES advice filing submitted on August 14th, detailing that the proposed PEV process changes and the proposal to require energy audits for its highest gas usage customers were removed, and the automation of online applications and CBO liaison language was retained.
 - **Filing Submission and Feedback:** Jennifer explained that the advice filing was submitted after incorporating feedback from stakeholders, especially TEP, resulting in the removal of proposals to remove the PEV process changes and the mandatory audits for high usage customers.
 - **Automation and Language Clarification:** The filing seeks to automate online applications and clarify how CBOs may act as liaisons with customers, as well as clean up language about auto-enrolling. The filing has a requested effective date requested of October 1.
 - **Open Meeting and Docket Information:** Jennifer noted that the filing is docketed as UG 260671 and will be on the public meeting agenda for September 24th, inviting participants to review the docket and reach out with questions.
 - **No Additional Administrative Changes:** Charlee inquired about other changes for the new program year, and Jennifer and Shannon confirmed that no further administrative or implementation changes are planned, aside from some Assist improvements post-October 1.
- **CBO Pilot Program Discussion and Future Outreach:** Shaylee raised questions about the conclusion of the CBO pilot, prompting Jennifer to clarify its end in March, discuss its inclusion in the annual report, and outline ongoing outreach efforts and the additive nature of CBO relationships without supplanting agency roles.
 - **CBO Pilot Conclusion:** Jennifer confirmed the CBO pilot ended in March, noting that reporting ceased and its summary will be included in the annual report, with plans to add a post-op discussion to the next meeting agenda.
 - **Outreach and Community Engagement:** Jennifer described ongoing relationships with select CBOs, providing them with program materials and leveraging categorical eligibility, emphasizing outreach to hard-to-reach customers as a natural program progression.
 - **Agency Roles and Additive Approach:** Jennifer assured Shaylee and others that CBO outreach is additive and does not replace agency efforts, with agencies continuing to receive customer names and conduct outreach, and no changes to contracts or responsibilities.

- **Future Planning and Annual Report:** Jennifer stated that further discussion on the CBO pilot's outcomes and future will occur at year-end during annual report compilation, ensuring compliance and group input.
- **Referral List Communication and Customer Experience:** Misty and Kandi shared concerns about customers being unaware of agency outreach after referrals, leading Jennifer and Noemi to discuss improving communication, handoffs, and potential automation to enhance customer understanding and agency partnerships.
 - **Customer Awareness Issues:** Misty and Kandi reported that customers are often surprised or upset when contacted by agencies after their names are referred, suggesting the need for better communication from CNG during initial customer interactions.
 - **Improving Referral Process:** Jennifer acknowledged the feedback and proposed exploring ways to provide a handoff, such as letters or co-branded materials, to inform customers about agency outreach and reduce confusion.
 - **Automation and Integrated Services:** Shaylee suggested automating customer consent and information sharing during enrollment, allowing customers to express interest in agency services, and discussed the importance of integrated service models for community benefit.
 - **Agency Communication Practices:** Sylvia described their agency's practice of sending introductory letters to referred customers, which has improved response rates and reduced confusion, highlighting the value of clear communication.
 - **Application Consent Language:** Jennifer noted that the online application includes language about data sharing with agencies but recognized that enhanced post-enrollment communication may further improve customer experience.
- **Automation of Online Applications and Agency Integration:** Shaylee and Jennifer discussed the planned automation of online CARES applications, focusing on reducing manual work while maintaining integrated services and exploring opportunities for improved messaging and partnership-centered communication.
 - **Automation Rationale:** Jennifer explained that most enrollments occur through the call center and that manual processing of online applications is untenable, prompting the need for automation to streamline the process.
 - **Maintaining Integrated Services:** Shaylee emphasized the importance of integrated service delivery and partnership-centered messaging, expressing concern that automation should not lead to siloed processes and should support agency collaboration.
 - **Potential Improvements:** Jennifer and Shaylee discussed possible enhancements, such as co-branded letters or brochures sent post-enrollment, and maximizing communication during customer interactions to support agency partnerships.
- **CARES Program Advertising on Bill Onserts:** Sylvia asked about the removal of CARES program advertising from bill onserts, and Jennifer explained that onserts are only included when space allows and are not scheduled regularly.
 - **Onsert Scheduling Explanation:** Jennifer clarified that CARES program advertising appears on bill onserts only when space is available and no other required is messaging, and that their inclusion is not on a fixed schedule.

Follow-up tasks:

- **CBO Pilot Debrief:** Add a post-mortem discussion of the CBO pilot to a future meeting agenda and prepare a narrative for inclusion in the annual report. (CNGC)
- **Referral List Communication Enhancement:** Discuss options for a handoff or enhanced post-enrollment communication (such as co-branded letters or brochures) to improve customer experience when agencies reach out. (CNGC)