



Agenda Date: 10/25/23
Agenda Item: 7A

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
Board of Public Utilities
44 South Clinton Avenue, 1st Floor
Post Office Box 350
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0350
www.nj.gov/bpu/

CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE

IN THE MATTER OF THE ENERGY ASSISTANCE)
GRANT AS AUTHORIZED UNDER N.J.S.A. 48:2-29.39) ORDER AUTHORIZING
AND N.J.S.A. 46:30B-74(b) PAYMENT ASSISTANCE) GRANT AWARD
FOR GAS AND ELECTRIC (PAGE) PROGRAM) DOCKET NO. EO23050278

Parties of Record:

Brian O. Lipman, Esq., Director, Division of Rate Counsel
Cheryl Stowell, CEO, New Jersey SHARES
Randi Moore, CEO, Affordable Housing Alliance
Leke Adekitan, Project Manager, Light Up Your World

BY THE BOARD:

By this Order, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (“Board”) considers a recommendation from Board Staff (“Staff”) to award funding to a non-profit organization to administer the Board’s Payment Assistance for Gas and Electric program (“PAGE”) during the next PAGE contract period, which begins January 2, 2024.

BACKGROUND/PROCEDURAL HISTORY

N.J.S.A. 48:2-29.39 authorizes the Board to designate an established statewide non-profit energy assistance organization to receive supplemental funding from unclaimed property held by the State’s electric and gas utilities pursuant to N.J.S.A. 46:30B-74. N.J.S.A. 46:30B-74 directs the administrator of the Unclaimed Utility Deposit Trust Fund (“Trust Fund”) to provide 75% of the money in the Trust Fund to the New Jersey Statewide Heating Assistance and Referral for Energy Services (“NJ SHARES”), or to another statewide nonprofit energy assistance organization designated by the Board within 45 days of the receipt of such funds. This funding makes the PAGE Program possible. The non-profit entity designated by the Board to receive the funds must use them to help electric or natural gas customers pay their electric or natural gas bills to avoid termination of service or restore service. The Affordable Housing Alliance (“AHA”) is the current PAGE program administrator and the Board’s contract with the AHA expires on December 31, 2023.

At its June 7, 2023 agenda meeting, the Board authorized the issuance of a Notice of Grant Availability (“Notice”) to solicit bids to procure an administrator for the next PAGE contract period.

The Notice was published in the New Jersey Register on July 17, 2023, as well as on the Board's website at <https://nj.gov/bpu/pdf/announcements/2023/PAGE.pdf>. The Notice was also emailed to various listservs related to utility assistance and energy efficiency programs. Additionally, a question and answer period was provided to all potentially interested bidders from July 17, 2023 through July 24, 2023. The questions and answers were posted to the Board's website at www.nj.gov/bpu/newsroom/public/ and emailed to all potentially interested parties on August 1, 2023. The Notice further provided that the Board would notify bidders of its decision by November 1, 2023.

The Notice informed the public that the Board was seeking an entity:

“...To administer a program that provides assistance towards payment of electric and/or natural gas utility bills for households seeking aid. The beneficiaries of such assistance will be public utility customers, hereinafter referred to generally as “Limited Income Households” and more specifically defined as follows: 1) New Jersey households with zero-to-moderate income; and 2) Facing a financial hardship that includes a recent documented notice of overdue payment for natural gas and/or electric service on the utility bill for which payment assistance is being sought.

Further, the Notice indicated that where practicable, if a PAGE applicant is income eligible for New Jersey's Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (“LIHEAP”) or the Universal Service Fund (“USF”) Program, the applicant should be directed to apply for those programs first in order to maximize total available benefits prior to seeking additional aid from the PAGE program. Additionally, the Notice indicated that no more than one (1) PAGE grant for electric service and one (1) PAGE grant for gas service may be provided to any applicant within a 12-month period.

Additionally, the Notice informed bidders that funding received by the chosen grantee must be split into two (2) separate accounts: 1) for low-income applicants (at or below the LIHEAP income limits); and 2) for moderate-income applicants (above the USF/LIHEAP income limits up to moderate income). Potential bidders were also informed that the chosen grantee shall provide information to PAGE qualifying households regarding New Jersey's state and utility-sponsored energy efficiency and renewable energy programs that are designed to serve low to moderate income households.

Finally, the Notice clarified that categorical eligibility for this program should be used where possible by the Program Administrator if it is demonstrated that the customer has recently participated in another income-based program in New Jersey, such as the USF or LIHEAP programs.

The deadline by which applicants were required to submit their proposals to the Board was 5:00 p.m. on September 15, 2023. In accordance with the requirements contained in the Notice, the Board received three (3) proposals from:

1. NJ SHARES;
2. AHA; and
3. Light Up Your World (“LUYW”)

An Evaluation Committee (“Committee”), consisting of five (5) representatives from Staff, reviewed the proposals.

The Committee was responsible for performing a review of each proposal received. The Notice provides a complete list of the evaluation criteria. The focus of the Committee's review was on the strengths and weaknesses of each proposal as it related to the applicant's ability to undertake and successfully complete the work required for the PAGE grant as specified in the Notice.

The Committee utilized a technical scoring format based on assigning points to each of the evaluation criteria listed in that section of the Notice.

RECOMMENDATION

As set forth in the Committee's evaluation report, the Committee selected NJ SHARES as the highest scoring bidder. The Committee members agree with the final scoring to rank NJ SHARES number one and recommended the selection of NJ SHARES as the recipient of the PAGE grant..

The Committee selected NJ SHARES for several reasons, including its 25 years of experience administering utility assistance programs statewide delivering \$89 million to over 211,000 households. The Committee also noted NJ SHARES network of over 200 partner organizations statewide (an average of 10 per county) which will help bear the statewide burden of processing applications and also help to spread awareness of the grant's availability to residents in need who go to these partners in search of help. The Committee was additionally pleased with the high level of proposed PAGE grants and NJ SHARES' ability to stack PAGE grants with its existing utility assistance programs including the NJ SHARES Mortgage Assistance Rent and Taxes ("SMART") utility assistance grant for low- and moderate-income households and the NJ SHARES' energy assistance grant for moderate income households.

The Committee appreciated NJ SHARES high level of detail using narrative and informative graphics to illustrate: the proposed PAGE eligibility and award criteria for both low- and moderate-income households; the required documentation; the application process from application submission to award; categorical eligibility; recertification procedures; and appeals process for denied applications.

The Committee was further pleased with NJ SHARES detailed marketing and outreach plan for increasing awareness of the grant to the target population, which included plans for working with the utilities to reach customers in arrears through a targeted text and robocall campaign that protects client data while getting program information to customers at risk of shut off or already disconnected. NJ SHARES described its many years of experience working with investor-owned utility companies across different sectors, which the Committee determined gave them a large client base with which to conduct outreach. Further, NJ SHARES indicated that it has bilingual staff and contracts with a translation service that can provide translation in over 200 languages, which the Committee felt is important in a state as diverse as New Jersey.

The Committee appreciated how NJ SHARES laid out in detail the secure verification process and methods it uses to protect applicant data including the use of multi-factor authentication, role-based system access and Amazon Web Services Virtual Private Cloud.

NJ SHARES confirmed that they could comply with all reporting requirements in the Notice as well as any future reporting as required by the Board. NJ SHARES also confirmed that they can provide information about all the Board's renewable energy and energy efficiency programs on their website, through email and print materials to PAGE clients.

NJ SHARES proposed they would pre-screen applicants by income and household size as well as if they have already applied to the USF and LIHEAP programs. As per the Board's Notice, they would direct income eligible applicants to take advantage of the USF and LIHEAP programs first before seeking supplemental assistance from the PAGE program. For customers who are eligible for PAGE, they would be considered for NJ SHARES' other grant programs depending on income level.

All of these factors combined led the Committee to believe NJ SHARES would administer the program most effectively and efficiently. The NJ SHARES proposal indicates that it will have PAGE up and running no later than the contract start date of January 2, 2024 so that NJ SHARES can provide seamless service to the public.

NJ SHARES indicated they would require that moderate income applicants make a \$25 good faith payment to their utility company within 90 days of their application for PAGE. NJ SHARES clarified this good faith payment could be split between gas and electric bills (\$12.50 each) if a customer applied for a PAGE grant for gas and electric at the same time. The committee agreed that this was a reasonable requirement for moderate income families and will help customers reestablish payment compliance with their utility company.

Below is a summary of the PAGE program NJ SHARES proposes for the next three-year contract period. There are two (2) PAGE grant caps, one (1) for low-income households and one (1) for moderate-income households. NJ SHARES estimates they would be able to provide PAGE grants to approximately 3,300 households in need using the average \$2.5 million of annual available funding:

NJSHARES PAGE Program	Low-income	Moderate-income
Income Eligibility Range	Zero to 60% State Median Income ¹	\$1 over 60% SMI up to NJ Median Income ²
Grant Cap Amount	\$500 per utility	\$700 per utility
Other Benefits Available to this Income Range	USF (max. \$2,160) LIHEAP (max. \$1,578) Lifeline (\$225) NJ SHARES SMART Grant (\$500 per utility)	NJ SHARES Energy Grant \$700 per utility NJ SHARES SMART Grant (\$500 per utility)
Good Faith Payment	Waived	\$25 for one utility or \$12.50 for each utility

The NJ SHARES proposal was sufficiently detailed, well thought out and thorough and led the Committee to conclude that NJ SHARES can best implement the PAGE program in the most efficient and effective manner and therefore unanimously recommends NJ SHARES be chosen as the PAGE program administrator for the next contract period.

¹ Sixty percent State Median Income for a household of four (4) persons is \$84,830. This is the income limit for the USF and LIHEAP programs.

² State Median Income for a household of four persons is \$141,384.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The Board recognizes the need for an open and transparent bidding process where public funds are concerned. After review of the evaluation process, the Board **HEREBY FINDS** the process was fair and impartial. Each Committee member independently evaluated each proposal, based upon the criteria as specified in the Notice, and each Committee member was provided with specific instructions for following the Notice criteria and applying them when scoring the applications. Therefore, each applicant was afforded the same opportunity to compete for the PAGE grant.

Applications were scored based upon the information each applicant provided by the application deadline. The details of each proposal were carefully reviewed by the Committee and, based upon the applications presented, NJ SHARES submitted the highest-ranking proposal.

The Board **HEREBY ACCEPTS** the recommendation of the Evaluation Committee to award the PAGE grant to NJ SHARES for a three-year period. Any unspent funds at the end of the contract shall be returned from NJ SHARES to the State or transferred by NJ SHARES to the Board's designated grantee.

The Board also **DIRECTS** the utilities to work with NJ SHARES to ensure applicants who have applied for and met the eligibility requirements of a PAGE grant will have that grant applied towards their utility bill in a timely manner. Additionally, the Board **DIRECTS** the utilities to protect a PAGE recipient from shut off of service for at least 30 days after the grant is applied to the utility account.

The Board **HEREBY AUTHORIZES** the Board President to sign the contract or grant agreement with NJ SHARES to implement PAGE.

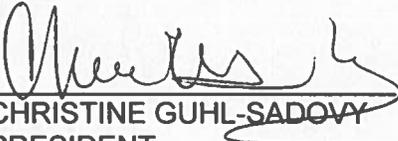
NJ SHARES shall adhere to the reporting requirements as set forth in the Notice of Grant Availability and any other reporting requirements specified in the contract and as set forth below:

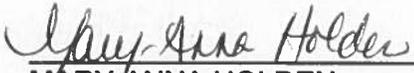
Monthly reports are required indicating number of applicants and recipients, broken down by utility company, municipality and zip code. Quarterly progress reports, accounting for all funds received and spent, will be required, including but not limited to the number and amount of financial assistance grants distributed to Limited Income Households by each electric and/or gas utility and when the grants are distributed. Quarterly reports shall also include actual program administrative costs for the applicable quarter. Within one (1) year of receiving the grant award, the nonprofit energy assistance organization shall issue a comprehensive report to the Board which provides the number of applicants applying for household utility assistance grants, the number of households receiving utility assistance grants, the average amount of assistance provided, the average gross income of households receiving assistance, the methods and procedures used for the verification of income or financial hardship, and any other information as required by the Board. This comprehensive report will be required on an annual basis after the first year or more frequently at the discretion of Staff.

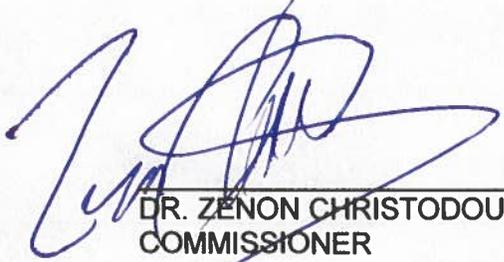
The effective date of this Order is November 1, 2023.

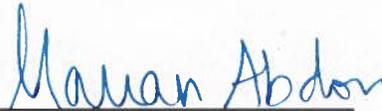
DATED: October 25, 2023

BOARD OF PUBLIC UTILITIES
BY:

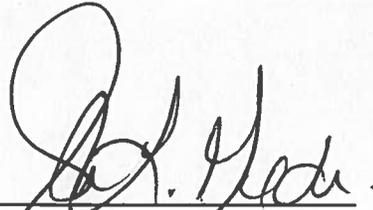

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COMMISSIONER

ATTEST:


SHERRI L. GOLDEN
SECRETARY

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the within
document is a true copy of the original
in the files of the Board of Public Utilities.

IN THE MATTER OF THE ENERGY ASSISTANCE GRANT AS AUTHORIZED UNDER N.J.S.A. 48:2-29.39 AND N.J.S.A. 46:30B-74(b) - PAYMENT ASSISTANCE FOR ELECTRIC AND GAS PROGRAM

DOCKET NO. EO23050278

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