

# Low-Income Forum on Energy



Final Report to the  
New York State Public Service Commission  
New York State Energy Research and Development Authority

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This document does not contain appendices. If you are interested in receiving copies of any appendices please contact:

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## **Introduction**

The Low-Income Forum on Energy (LIFE) represents New York State's first significant public policy dialogue on the impact that energy has on the economic self-sufficiency of low-income New Yorkers. The forum's first product, the LIFE Conference, was held on April 28 and 29, 1999 at the University at Albany. The conference attracted 175 participants from more than 80 organizations which represented state agencies, statewide advocates, the state legislature, community-based organizations, utilities, energy services companies, national and out-of-state interests (see appendix F).

LIFE was initiated following an October, 1997 request by Sue Montgomery Corey of the New York State Community Action Association (NYSCAA) to Public Service Commission member (now Chairman) Maureen O. Helmer. At the time of NYSCAA's initial dialogue with Chairman Helmer, New York was engaged in the settlement discussions with individual utilities for the Competitive Opportunities and Bypass Case (Case #94-E-0952) which laid the foundation for introducing competition in the electric industry. Low-income issues were considered in 94-E-0952 and related cases in a peripheral way, but there was no clear path through the existing regulatory proceedings to have the kind of wholistic dialogue that could allow the needs of low-income customers to be discussed and addressed.

LIFE was designed to more comprehensively examine these issues.

## **LIFE Steering Committee Created**

The outcome of the dialogue between NYSCAA and the PSC was the creation of a multi-party Steering Committee charged with planning a conference on the needs of low-income energy customers. The Steering Committee, chaired by Michael Corso of the Public Service Commission, began work in February, 1998 and met monthly until the implementation of the LIFE conference which was hosted by the Public Service Commission with underwriting for conference implementation provided by the NYS Energy Research and Development Authority.

To implement the conference planning more effectively, the Steering Committee appointed several smaller working groups to tackle specific components of the planning process. These included the logistics, content, and roundtable committees.

Parties participating in the Steering Committee meetings either prior to the conference or in the post-conference activities are identified in the appendix A. *Low-Income Forum on Energy Partners*, which immediately follows the end of this report. Also included in this appendix are the members of the Conference planning committees and those involved in the post-conference continuing dialogue.

Prior to the actual implementation of the LIFE conference and following its execution, the Division of Housing and Community Renewal provided resources to the

New York State Community Action Association to allow NYSCAA to provide staff coordination to the LIFE Steering Committee and its working subcommittees. The availability of these resources helped to insure that the strong, cross-party dialogue that was initiated through the LIFE Conference could continue to grow and evolve.

### **Identifying the Needs and Concerns of Low-Income New Yorkers**

A series of eight regional discussion groups were held around the state to provide an opportunity for low-income New Yorkers and service providers to identify needs and concerns of low-income energy customers. This effort was undertaken to ensure that the voices of low-income New Yorkers were included in the forum and to recognize the challenges inherent in getting a diverse group of low-income customers to Albany for the forum. A summary of the questions and the discussions held through this process is attached in appendix H.

One of the discussion groups was conducted in Spanish. The remaining seven were conducted in English. All were facilitated by staff of the Dept. of Public Service using a structured list of questions developed by the LIFE Roundtable Committee. Members of the Steering Committee were invited to participate in the sessions. Regional Discussion Groups were held in the following locations and hosted by the following organizations:

<b>Regional Discussion Group Sites</b>	
New York City	Northern Manhattan Improvement Corp. Association for Energy Affordability*
Ithaca	Economic Opportunity Council of Tompkins
Watertown	Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County*
Buffalo	National Fuel Gas Distribution Corporation
Troy	Commission on Economic Opportunity for the Greater Capital Region
Poughkeepsie	Dutchess County Community Action
*Indicates workshops where service providers participated.	

## **State and National Speakers Featured**

The Steering Committee established a goal for LIFE which was “To further the dialogue and understanding of, issues that impact the ability of low-income New Yorkers to have access to safe, reliable, and affordable energy.” To achieve this important goal, the Steering Committee created a conference agenda designed both to educate and encourage active participation by those attending.

The decision to hold the conference at the University at Albany, while logistically challenging, established a tone for LIFE as a working conference which supported the bringing together of diverse parties and ideas. Welcoming remarks by the University’s President, Karen Hitchcock, helped to raise the profile of low-income energy issues for those attending. It also raised the profile of the event on campus.

The conference agenda featured a range of state and national speakers whose biographies are included in appendix E. The two-day event began with an initial plenary session which included opening remarks from Lt. Governor Mary Donohue who spoke on behalf of Governor George E. Pataki. The plenary also featured the perspectives of Chairman Helmer of the PSC, Commissioner Brian Wing of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and William Davis, the CEO of Niagara Mohawk on the impact that the changing energy market and welfare reform would have on low-income energy customers. Rounding out the plenary was a presentation by Joel Eisenberg of Oak Ridge National Lab which defined who low-income energy customers are, their needs and attributes.

Following the morning session, there was an invocation by Bishop Howard Hubbard of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, a long-time advocate for low-income New Yorkers. Lunch and a keynote by New Hampshire Public Utility Commission Member Nancy Brockway on the Obligation to Serve followed the invocation.

During the afternoon, participants were provided more intensive sessions on three key topics selected by the Steering Committee:

- Consumer Protection and Access to Service
- Reducing the Energy Burden of Low-Income Customers in a Competitive Energy Supply Market: Strategies for Reducing Both the Supply and Distribution Components of their Bills
- Energy Efficiency as an Affordability Strategy

To ensure that the intensive conference schedule included a significant opportunity for participants to interact with the speakers and with each other, a reception was held at the Campus Center at the end of the first day.

At the beginning of day two, conference participants had the opportunity to benefit from the legislative perspectives of Assembly Energy Committee Chair Paul Tonko and Senate Energy and Telecommunications Committee Member Patrick Manning. This session was chaired by PSC Commissioner/Judge Leonard Weiss. This was followed by a briefing from the Public Service Commission on the results of the eight regional discussion groups held around the state which incorporated the input from customers and service providers.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the LIFE conference was the work group component on day two. Participants were assigned by color coding on their name tags to one of eight work groups. Each work group included participants from across the spectrum of organizations participating in the conference. The work groups were designed to provide an interactive opportunity for participants to use the information learned on day one and bring to the conference dialogue their own observations and expertise on the energy needs of low-income customers.

Each work group featured a facilitator, recorder, and resource person. Each included representatives from state government, statewide low-income advocates, community-based organizations, and utilities. Work group members were asked to use the information provided in the three intensive sessions from the first afternoon's agenda as background in responding to four major questions:

- How will this convergence of issues (welfare reform, the move to a competitive energy market and limited program resources) impact low-income New Yorkers' ability to obtain safe, affordable energy? To what extent will these issues impact different segments of the low-income community differently?
- What are the potential barriers (organizational, regulatorily, legislatively) that might limit or inhibit effective implementation of responses to meet low-income energy needs?
- What are the potential opportunities (organizational, regulatorily, legislatively) that might enhance effective implementation of responses to meet low-income energy needs?
- Are there pertinent issues/concepts/potential solutions that have not been discussed at this Forum?

Each group was asked to summarize their discussion on flip charts and present these summaries to the larger Forum at the closing session. The results of those presentations were wallnotes which were distributed to all participants following the conference. Those have been attached to this report.

## **Conference Budget and Expenses**

The conference budget for LIFE was initially \$35,000. Variations were made on this budget throughout the process. The final conference financial report indicates that LIFE was brought to fruition well within its projected budget. A number of factors contributed to this. First, several of the speakers agreed to appear and did not charge the conference for their travel. A second major contributing factor was that fewer scholarships were requested than anticipated. Finally, in-kind contributions by the Consumer Protection Board and Public Service Commission allowed the printing line to remain below budgeted levels. The final conference financial report is attached in appendix L.

## **Metrics and Data Collection**

LIFE Conference participants were asked to complete a standard conference evaluation at the end of the event which solicited feedback from them on whether or not the conference met their expectations. It is included in this report in appendix K. The survey examined several conference elements: materials, facilities, food, parking, conference staff, and speakers. The survey also asked participants to identify the best ideas heard at the conference as well as their biggest concerns and a listing of others who should be invited to join the LIFE dialogue. Eighty-two conference participants completed surveys. Their responses were largely positive and supportive of a continuing LIFE dialogue. The summary of those responses is attached.

As noted earlier in this report, the goal of the LIFE conference was “To further the dialogue and understanding of, issues that impact the ability of low-income New Yorkers to have access to safe, reliable, and affordable energy.” The objectives linked to this goal could be described as follows:

- To create a forum which attracts a diverse range of parties whose efforts will have an impact on the ability of low-income customers to be successful in a competitive energy market.
- To develop a forum agenda which identifies the full range of parameters of the low-income energy dialogue and communicates them in a way that allows participants who have not been part of the energy dialogue to join it in a significant way.
- To encourage linkages between the parties participating in the forum which will strengthen the understanding of and support for the energy needs of low-income New Yorkers, particularly in a changing energy and human service environment.

## **Objective #1: Creating a forum attractive to diverse parties**

Data collection in support of this objective occurred on several levels. First, by bringing together a Steering Committee which included a diverse range of 24 parties who were current participants in the Competitive Opportunities proceedings, the PSC was able to begin to identify the range of issues, opportunities and barriers inherent in the low-income energy dialogue. It also made possible the development of a conference mailing of more than 2,300 names which included a diverse blend of local government, state government, community-based organizations, utility and energy services companies, low-income advocates and others.

A review of the attendance list for LIFE in appendix F indicates that more than 80 organizations were represented by the 175 participants. This response would indicate a reasonable level of institutional diversity.

To further enhance the diversity of the parties at LIFE, scholarships were made available. Scholarships ranged from \$50 to \$275 depending on the needs of the participant. Those receiving included one legislative staff member, two local government representatives, four community action/weatherization participants, three rural preservation companies, three state low-income advocates, a community-based Consumer Education Council, and a Head Start Program. Of those offered scholarships, three were ultimately unable to attend.

One of the concerns raised about the forum was that while it was institutionally diverse, attendance by low-income people was limited. The Steering Committee's goal in making scholarships available was to ensure that the expense of the conference would not be a barrier to attendance by low-income people and the organizations which serve them at the community level. If this type of forum is undertaken in the future, NYSCAA recommends that the scholarship component be marketed more aggressively with a long window on the application process. The conference agenda should also be tailored to better support participation by low-income people.

LIFE participants were asked to complete a conference evaluation which provided feedback about the facilities, agenda, and speakers. The evaluation indicates that LIFE did meet the expectations of those attending. The information included in the evaluation will be used by the Steering Committee to inform any future LIFE events.

## **Objective #2: Building an Agenda that Identifies the Parameters of the Dialogue**

Data collection on this objective occurred through the dialogues held by the Steering Committee at its monthly meetings and was further refined by two of the subcommittees, the Content Committee and Roundtable Committee. This was enhanced by data about the needs and concerns of low-income New Yorkers that was gleaned through the regional discussion groups coordinated by the Department of Public Service.

The inclusion of national level speakers, in particular, Joel Eisenberg of Oak Ridge National Lab, allowed the experiences of other states to be shared which provided an important context for the New York dialogue.

Data collected through the workgroup process on day two both validated and expanded the parameters of the dialogue. Most participants who attended day one continued with day two and actively participated in one of the work groups.

Copies of the wallnotes developed in the work groups were sent to all LIFE participants following the conference. This package was accompanied by a cover letter from the Steering Committee Chair which invited participants to continue the dialogue and sought their suggestions on how to make the dialogue stronger.

### **Objective #3: Encouraging Institutional Linkages That Will Allow Continued Dialogue**

Although no formal data collection effort has been underway to document the linkages which developed and continue as a result of LIFE, it is clear that LIFE has had a significant impact on those who attended. Informally, the Public Service Commission credits the LIFE process with improving its relationships with many parties involved in the Low-Income dialogue, especially the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the Consumer Protection Board.

Each member of the Steering Committee has, no doubt, similar experiences. As one of the most active and longest-tenured members of the Steering Committee, NYSCAA has observed that communication among the parties is much stronger than it was when the conference planning began in early 1998. In fact, NYSCAA's experience has been that involvement in LIFE has increased the Association's relationship with many parties. For example, improved relationships with Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation and the NYS Electric and Gas Corp. have resulted in better collaboration and services for community-based weatherization and community action agencies which serve Low-Income people.

### **LIFE: The Dialogue Continues**

Following the LIFE Conference, PSC Chairman Maureen Helmer met with the LIFE Steering Committee for a conference debriefing and to express her appreciation for the quality and depth of the conference. She urged them to continue working to strengthen the dialogue begun at the conference and asked Michael Corso to continue as Steering Committee Chair. The Steering Committee eagerly accepted the challenge of continuing the LIFE dialogue.

This may represent one of the strongest indicators of LIFE's success. Prior to the planning process and implementation of LIFE, the idea of a wholistic dialogue on the

energy needs of low-income customers appeared to be a pipe dream to many parties. Many believed that such could not occur outside the PSC's regular proceeding process. It is a tribute to Chairman Helmer and to the diverse parties who participated that it did.

The Steering Committee has met four times since the LIFE conference. Three working subcommittees have been appointed to address specific components of the dialogue. Notes from the initial meetings of two of those have been included. The third, the Consumer Protection Committee, has met but has indicated that they are waiting for an indication from the PSC about the direction of the provider of last resort in order to better refine their mission and direction.

Communication with the participants of the LIFE conference continues. Each participant received a copy of the wallnotes from the working group of the conference along with a letter from Steering Committee Chair, Michael Corso, advising them of the continuing LIFE Dialogue. The Communications and Outreach Committee is also preparing a survey of the LIFE participants concerning their information, education and outreach needs.

The Low-Income Forum on Energy provided many lessons for the parties involved. One of the most key is the critical importance of a dynamic, continuing mechanism to understand and address the energy needs of low-income New Yorkers. NYSCAA proposes that the Low-Income Forum on Energy continue and that a second conference be scheduled for the spring of 2001. This will allow the parties to come together as the State's System Benefits Charge is in its final year and the State is contemplating its continuation.