

Connecting Residential Customers with COVID Bill Assistance

**City Council & Utility Board Study Session
August 17, 2021
Item #2**





Agenda

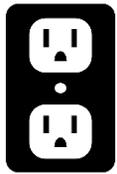


- Background on the City's utilities and residential bill balances
- Efforts to connect qualifying residential customers with relief
- Recommendation and tactics to better connect qualifying residential customers to available assistance
- Additional communications and outreach

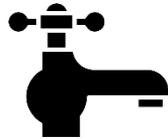
Tacoma's Utility Customers



Tacoma residents typically receive services from five City utilities



Power



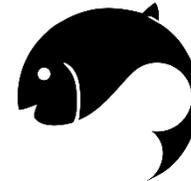
Water



Wastewater



Solid Waste

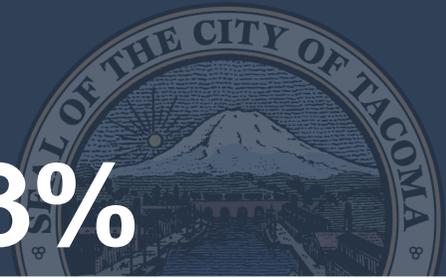


Surface Water

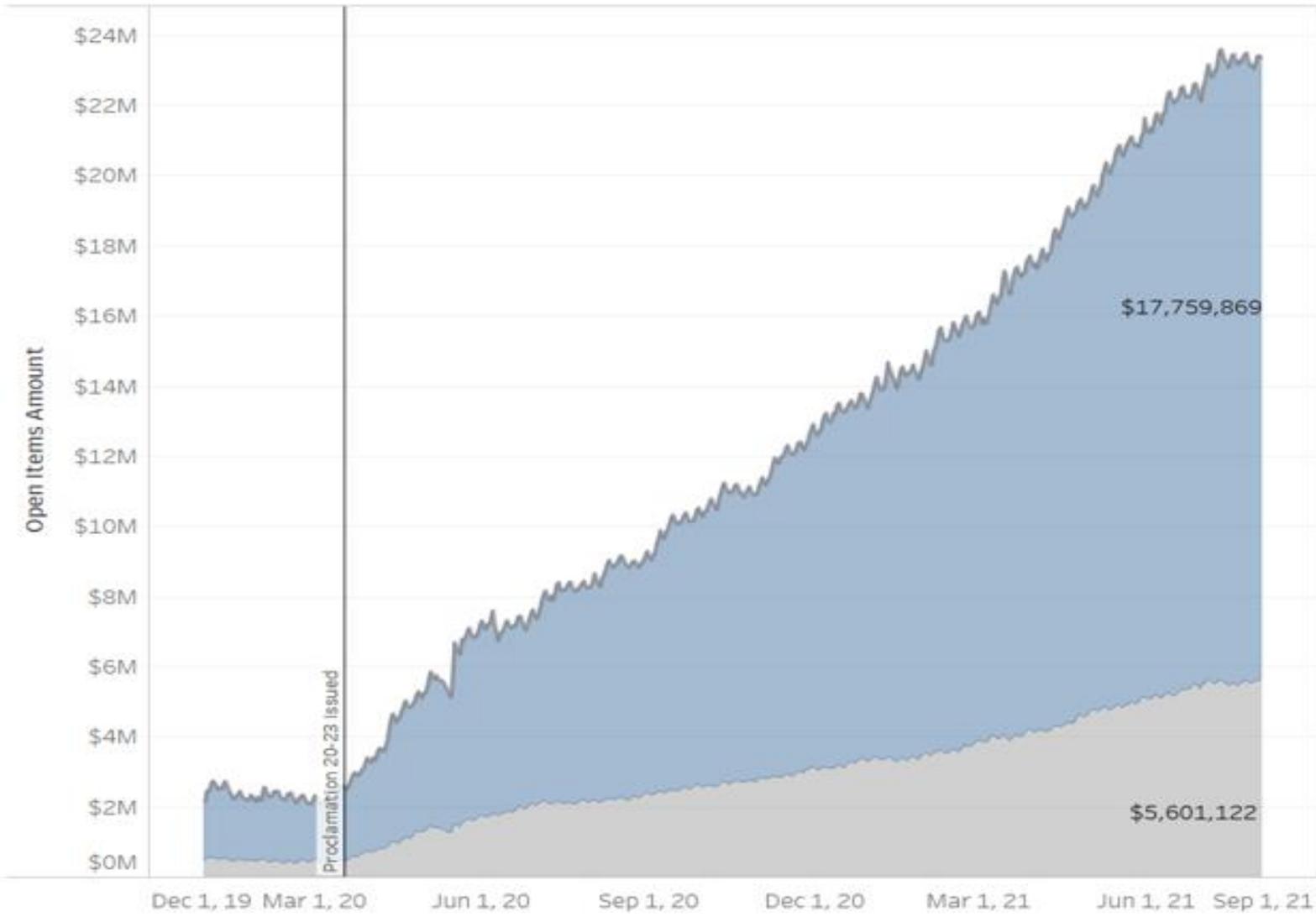


Supporting Utility Customers

- Mayor Woodards then Governor Inslee issued utility disconnection moratoriums in March 2020
 - Governor Inslee's moratorium scheduled to end in September 2021
- \$2.4 million Emergency Assistance Program created quickly
- \$750k Tacoma small businesses program deployed [CARES]
- \$3.2 million in LIHEAP distributed through partners
- Working with partners to apply COVID dollars to accounts
- Multichannel customer outreach, including 1000s of calls



Overdue Balances Up 1063%



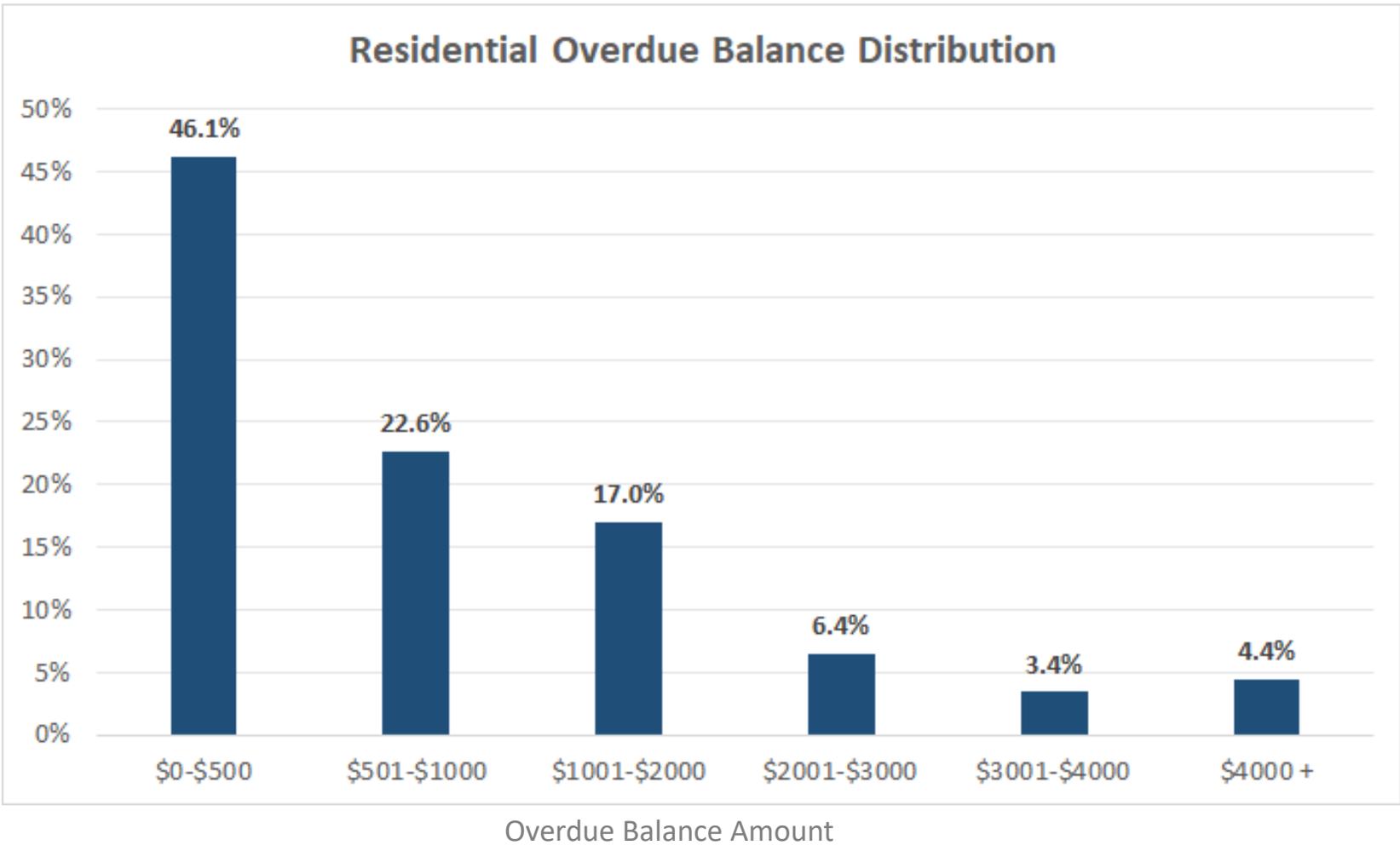
\$23,360,991 total current residential utilities overdue:

- **\$17,759,869** In Tacoma
- **\$5,601,122** Outside City

29,027 total residential customers are overdue or about 15% of all residential customers



Building a Bridge to Customers



While the total amount overdue and number of customers grow, currently:

- 85% owe < \$2,000
- 68% owe < \$1,000



Time-sensitive Federal Dollars

- Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
 - Up to \$2,500 in overdue bill assistance available for qualifying electrically-heated households
- Emergency Rental and Utility Assistance
 - Up to 12 months of rental and utility assistance available to qualifying households
 - No dollar amount cap
- Homeowners Assistance Fund/Low Income Household Water Assistance Program still in development



Recommendations & Future Plans

Staff recommendation:

- Set a date certain to end utility disconnection moratorium

With a date certain to end the moratorium:

- Automatic 18-month installment plans for COVID bills
- Late fees would not be collected on past-due COVID balances
- Communicate with customers to connect them with help ASAP
- Continue work with local/state/federal governments on tactics to speed utility assistance, more help for customers



Connecting Customers with Help



- Utility customers must act to receive assistance
- Targeted multi-lingual messaging to past due customers
 - Information about payment plans and assistance funds
 - High-visibility communications to customers in advance of moratorium(s) ending
 - Emphasize that customers must act to receive assistance
- Ongoing multi-lingual communications campaign to all residential customers
 - Provide information to media, non-profit partners, others
 - Emphasize that customers must act to receive assistance



Recovery Plan for Households

Following a firm date to end the utility disconnection moratorium:

- Continue to proactively communicate with households
- Late fees would not be collected on past-due COVID balances
- Automatically extend past due charges using an 18-month installment plan
- Seek to settle past due charges with community/federal funding
- Continue to enroll eligible households in recently expanded Discount Rate or Bill Credit Assistance Plan (BCAP) programs



Summary



We want to connect every customer possible with available bill assistance

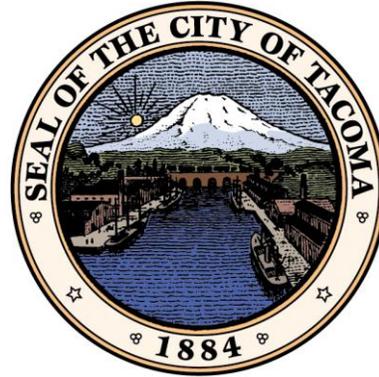
City staff will continue communicating and working with customers to help

A date certain to end the utility disconnection moratorium will help us connect more customers with assistance

Resources for Customers



- PierceCountyWa.gov/housinghelp
 - Site for Utility and Rental Assistance
- mytpu.org/assistance
- Dial 2-1-1



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