

# The NEC Interview Project

By the Energy Rights Project



# What is the project?

The **Energy Rights Project** is a three-year **qualitative** study of household energy vulnerability. The project focuses on how utility assistance works.

Some of our research questions are:

- How do households meet their energy needs creatively?
- What do household energy users know about energy systems?
- How do energy service organizations (like ECA and the NECs) help people meet their energy needs?
- What are the limitations of utility assistance policies and programs?
  - For example, the income guidelines are too low, leaving out many working families. PA LIHEAP could fund household A/C like they do heaters.

# How do we do the research?

**We talk to people. We conduct phone surveys and open ended interviews to hear peoples experience and opinions.**

1) How do households meet their energy needs creatively?

- **We survey and interview utility customers through ECA workshops**

2) What do household energy users know about energy systems?

- **We survey and interview utility customers through ECA workshops**

3) How do energy service organizations (like ECA and the NECs) help people meet their energy needs?

- **We interview energy experts, such as NEC staff**

4) What are the limitations of utility assistance policies and programs?

- **We interview energy experts**

# Who participated in the NEC interview project?

**10 out of 15 NECs**

**14 NEC staff members**

**Lots of experience!**

*"I started with my NEC in the summer of 2019. I live in the community that I serve. And so, it kind of was this transition from volunteer to, "Hey, we have a position open. You should probably apply." And then I applied, and I got the job."*

# How to give feedback or participate in the project

**We will have time for discussion at the end of the presentation!**

**Email or call me**

Email: [ali.kenner@gmail.com](mailto:ali.kenner@gmail.com)

Phone: 518-221-5360

**Do a formal interview with me**

I continue to do interviews! The project will be ongoing for another year.

**Send your ideas for how to promote the NECs**

Would a report be useful? Social media material?

What did I ask  
during the  
interviews?

**When did you start working for your NEC, and how did you start working here?**

**Before COVID-19, tell me what a typical day at the NEC looked like. If you don't have a typical day, what were some of your regular activities?**

**When a client comes into your office, what's the first thing you do? How do you help the client get their needs met?**

**What programs do you offer through your NEC?**

**Do you work with other organizations? What do these partnerships look like?**

**Do you use any data or software programs in your work?**

**How has COVID-19 impacted your work as a NEC?**

**What challenges do you face in your work, before and after the pandemic?**

**Do you have successes that you'd like to share? Things that you think work really well?**

**What does the future of NECs look like to you?**

# Themes from the Interviews



**The NEC Model**



**Impacts of the  
Pandemic**



**Progress & Hope**



# The NEC Model: What sets you apart

## **NECs as a one-stop shop**

Neighborhood-based services that inform and connect folks with a broad range of services

## **Walk-ins and appointments**

Walk-ins can be more convenient for clients but have some drawbacks. Appointments are better for giving difficult news.

## **Budget and energy counseling**

This is a huge service to be able to provide individuals and families. Education is key!

## **Advocating for clients**

Working with clients to get as much documentation as possible. Writing notes with applications. Checking up on clients.

# Known Challenges in Energy Assistance Work

## **Income Guidelines**

Everyone we talked to said that the income guidelines make it so many families don't qualify.

## **Documentation**

Getting the right documentation, on time, and putting together a complete application was named the most difficult part of the work.

## **The work is emotionally draining**

Clients are in crisis when they come in for services.

## **Redundancy in paperwork**

It's a lot to fill out the same information over and over again across different forms.

# The Impacts of the Pandemic

**Fewer clients in  
2020-2021...**

## **Difficult transition to remote work**

Files were left in office. You needed to learn new machines. You were without printers and tech support. Had to learn how to do things online and by phone.

## **Problems with documentation worsen**

Clients do not have internet access to send in documents. Quality of document scans are poor. Can't get signatures.

## **Disconnected from clients and coworkers**

There was a lot of conversation about how senior clients were isolated and unable to use technology.

## **COVID relief policies made things more confusing for everyone**

Incomes were changing because of unemployment and layoffs, and there were new programs.

"Yes, most definitely because we were working from home for a long time. Our first day back in the office since March of 2020 was October of 2020 and there was a great decline. It was like pulling teeth to get people in because we had been closed. We couldn't come in. And sometimes they would drop their information off and we would pick it up. Or we would check the messages and call them and tell them that we're not in the office. We did a lot of stuff from home too at that time, from March to October. But once we got back in and they knew we were here, I was a lot busier from October to November 2020. We were very busy. And then we got kind of slow. I don't know why. But we are doing things and doing more outreach now than we've ever did before. So, things are picking up a little bit better now."

”

”

I think the number of applications has gone down. I think it has gone down for a number of reasons. I think that you have your utility companies, PECO and PGW are sending out the applications for LIHEAP directly in a person's mail and they also are advertising that you can apply online and receive the grant. So given that, people that are able to navigate and do that, that's fine. Unfortunately, as I said, there's a number of seniors ... I don't want to say there's a huge number that's not able to navigate that. So we get those people that have to come in, walk in. There's still that population out there that needs the face-to-face, hands-on, walk-through approach of filling out or completing that information that's required.”

# Progress and Hope

## **New/more funding opportunities**

There has been some new funding through donations and foundation grants, and also federal programs.

## **New forms of outreach**

Setting up mobile clinics. Going door to door. Pairing food distribution with NEC work. Calling clients directly.

## **New ways to do work**

Some folks may continue doing more appointments and working remotely to help keep up on paperwork.

## **Much more media attention**

Energy vulnerability was in the news a lot this year!

"I called everybody that I thought was a vulnerable person and told them we're open by phone, you can call us if you have any issues. And this is my work cell phone now. And so a lot of those people have been calling throughout, or sending text messages, or if they ever have a problem, I mean there's, of our ongoing clients, a lot of them I still talk to regularly. They do wish they could pop in the office. They do sometimes come to the office if they have a specific need, but we can't have somebody coming into the office every week when we have such limited appointments."

”

"We actually have a flyer. What I did was I went to the grocery stores and I leave them all the way around. Some grocery stores have this board with information on it. I usually put a couple of flyers on there. Everywhere I go, if I go somewhere and somebody is in line and needs help or my neighbor or anybody, and then I usually tell people, word of mouth."

# Your suggestions

## **Protest. Get politically active.**

One person talked reflected on previous political activism and demanding change.

## **Join the fight for RGGI.**

Another person mentioned Liz Robinson's presentation about RGGI this spring and how NECs should get involved in community solar.

## **Increase income guidelines**

So more households qualify for services.

## **Offer tech training to clients**

So that remote services can continue and more people can use them.

## **Create a NEC directory**

So that NECs can reference each other and know what services other NECs offer.

## **Create comments section on applications**

This would allow energy counselors to explain things that couldn't be included in the application.

## **More funding for small home repairs**

BSRP is often very behind and few people qualify. More programming is needed for small home repairs that can make homes more efficient.



# How to give feedback or participate in the project

**We will have time for discussion at the end of the presentation!**

## **Email or call me**

Email: [ali.kenner@gmail.com](mailto:ali.kenner@gmail.com)

Phone: 518-221-5360

## **Do a formal interview with me**

I continue to do interviews! The project will be ongoing for another year.

## **Send your ideas for how to promote the NECs**

Would a report be useful? Social media material?

Thank you  
everyone

---

