



Department Source: Public Health and Human Services

To: City Council

From: City Manager & Staff

Council Meeting Date: August 5, 2024

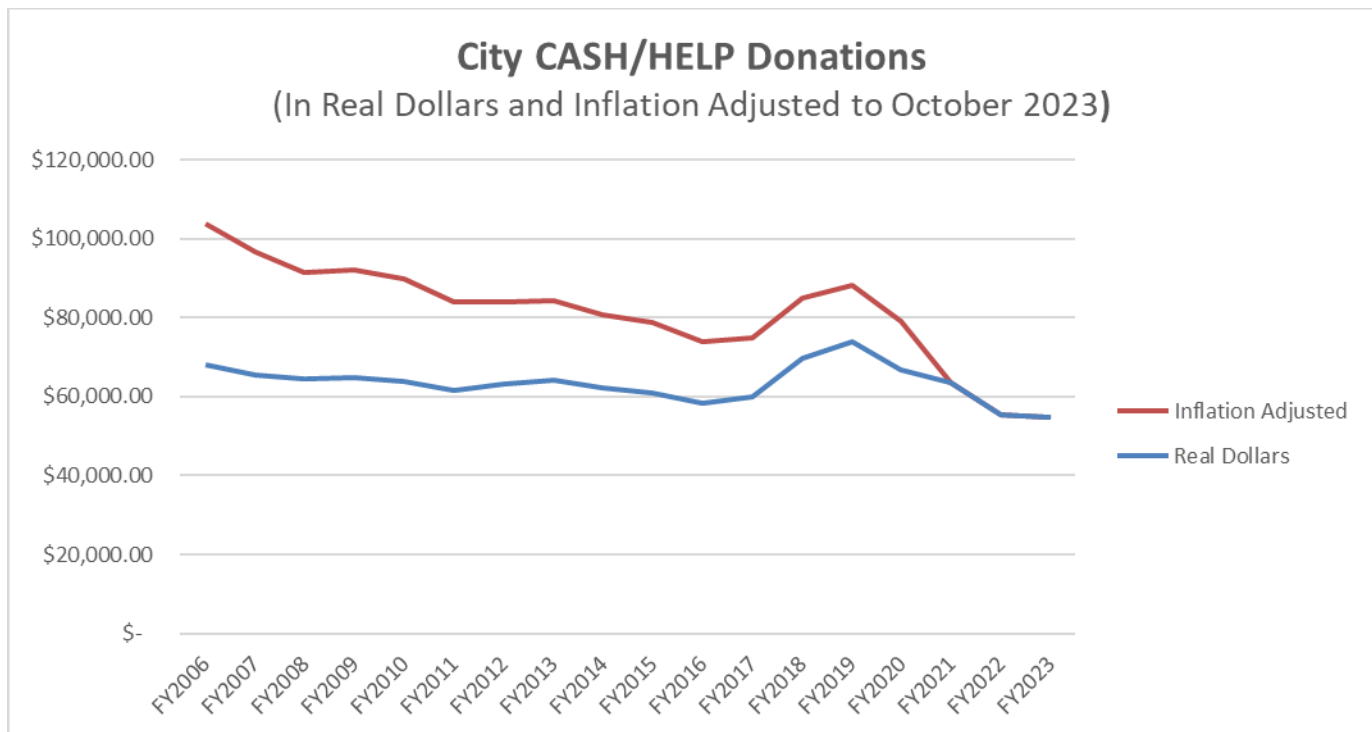
Re: CASH and HELP Programs

## Executive Summary

This report outlines staff recommendations for phasing out the CASH and HELP utility assistance programs.

## Discussion

For decades, the City of Columbia has provided utility assistance to low-income seniors, persons with disabilities, and families with children in Columbia. Historically, the City relied primarily on donations to the CASH and HELP programs to fund utility assistance. However, the amount of CASH/HELP donations has steadily decreased over time, markedly so when adjusted for inflation.



In response, the City:

- Allocated \$300,000 in general revenue funding in FY2021 and FY2022 and \$600,000 in FY2023 and FY2024.
- Established the City Utility Assistance Program in 2021, to which all donations for utility assistance are now directed.
- Developed and implemented an online donations portal on the City’s website in 2022.
- Implemented a round up option for City Utilities customers in 2023, through which monthly utility bills can be rounded up to the next whole dollar as a donation.



In addition to dwindling donations, the CASH and HELP programs are also challenging to administer for several reasons:

- The CASH and HELP program guidelines, as defined in ordinance, are more restrictive than the City Utility Assistance program. For example:
  - The CASH and HELP programs are limited to households with incomes less than 150% of the federal poverty level (FPL), whereas the City Utility Assistance program serves households with incomes up to 200% of FPL in order to provide assistance to people who are working but not earning a living wage.
  - As a legacy of the welfare reform era, households with children are limited to receiving assistance only five times in a lifetime from the HELP program.
  - The annual assistance limit per household for the CASH program is \$600 while the limit for the HELP program is \$275; whereas, the City Utility Assistance program annual limit for all eligible populations is \$900 for electric customers and \$600 for non-electric customers.
- Because donations to the CASH and HELP program are for separate populations, there have been multiple occasions in which funds were depleted in one fund but not the other, resulting in the inability to assist either families with children or seniors and persons with disabilities.
- Administering three separate donations funds is very resource intensive for multiple departments.

For these reasons, staff is recommending that the CASH and HELP programs be phased out. To do so, staff proposes that letters be sent to CASH and HELP donors indicating the CASH and HELP programs are being closed to donations and asking that they consider instead donating to the City Utility Assistance Program. There are currently 823 donors to the CASH and HELP programs and 166 donors to the City Utility Assistance program. Once the CASH and HELP programs funds are fully expended, staff would prepare an ordinance amending the code to remove the CASH and HELP programs.

## Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: None.

Long-Term Impact: None.

## Strategic & Comprehensive Plan Impact

### Strategic Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Safe Community, Secondary Impact: Inclusive and Equitable Community, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

### Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Not Applicable, Secondary Impact: Not applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable



# City of Columbia

701 East Broadway, Columbia, Missouri 65201

## Legislative History

Date	Action
07/06/2021	Amending Chapter 27 of the City Code to establish an account at the Columbia Trust for utility assistance contributions; authorizing establishment of a Utility Assistance Program and contributions to such program by the Columbia Trust; amending the FY 2021 Annual Budget by appropriating funds. <a href="https://gocolumbiamo.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4990321&amp;GUID=D00E847D-D97F-4B27-9911-7C2A40475107&amp;Options=ID Text &amp;Search=024693">https://gocolumbiamo.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4990321&amp;GUID=D00E847D-D97F-4B27-9911-7C2A40475107&amp;Options=ID Text &amp;Search=024693</a>

## Suggested Council Action

Accept the report and provide direction to staff regarding the proposal to phase out the CASH and HELP utility assistance programs.