



Department Source: Finance

To: City Council

From: City Manager & Staff

Council Meeting Date: June 21, 2021

Re: An Ordinance Establishing the City Utility Assistance Program; Appropriating Funds

## Executive Summary

Staff proposes the implementation of a new utility assistance program titled City Utility Assistance Program and the establishment of a utility assistance trust account within the Columbia Trust. The program guidelines will be established by PHHS and the Finance Department to help city residents who need utility assistance and are not served by the CASH and HELP programs.

## Discussion

The Public Health and Human Services Department (PHHS) administers a suite of utility assistance programs which provide financial assistance for utility bills for residents of Boone County. PHHS utility assistance programs serve persons who are elderly and/or disabled and families with children age 18 and under and in low income households. These programs include the City CASH and City HELP programs.

PHHS staff have identified two primary issues in meeting the community need for utility assistance. The first is that vast majority of funding for PHHS utility assistance programs is from customer donations and over the past decade, donations have declined significantly. The other is that the requirements for the City CASH and HELP programs are defined in the City Code, which presents challenges in adapting programming. For example, the City HELP program ordinance limits assistance five times in a lifetime, while the CASH ordinance does not include this limitation. We have also experienced situations in which HELP funds were completely depleted while CASH funds were available, thereby putting staff in the position of explaining that the City could not provide assistance to households with children while providing assistance to elderly and/or disabled persons.

While the City CASH and HELP ordinances could be amended, donations made prior to those changes would need to be used in the manner outlined in ordinance, which would create complexity in programming. If changes are made to the City CASH and HELP ordinances, monthly donors would need to agree to restart donations under the amended ordinances. Because many of the City CASH and HELP donations are made by long time, monthly donors, these requirements may further deteriorate the already diminishing donations to the City CASH and HELP programs.

As recommended by staff at the May 17, 2021 City Council meeting, the proposed City Utility Assistance Program would be seeded with \$300,000 from the City's FY2021 excess reserve funds. The program would be sustained with City Utilities customer donations. All new donations for utility assistance would be directed to the City Utility Assistance trust account.



# City of Columbia

701 East Broadway, Columbia, Missouri 65201

The proposed Utility Assistance Program funded by the establishment of a utility assistance trust account is an efficient and responsive customer and donor focused solution which will allow the City to more easily recruit new donors while maintaining the existing donor base for the City CASH and HELP programs.

The passage of the ordinance would amend Section 27-27 of the City Code to allow city utility customers to donate to the Columbia Trust account for utility assistance. This ordinance will also authorize the funds in the utility assistance trust account to be spent to provide utility assistance to city utility customers according to the guidelines and requirements established by the PHHS and Finance Department for the new Utility Assistance Program.

## Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: One-time expense of \$300,000

Long-Term Impact: None.

## Strategic & Comprehensive Plan Impact

### Strategic Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Social Equity, Secondary Impact: Not Applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

### Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Livable & Sustainable Communities, Secondary Impact: Not applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

## Legislative History

Date	Action
05/17/2021	B164-21 Amending the FY 2021 Annual Budget by appropriating funds for Round 3 CDBG-CV public assistance programs, an employee wage and benefits study, a business license and health inspection rebate program, 2020 licensing fee rebates for restaurants and bars, and hotel/motel and concert venue reimbursements.

## Suggested Council Action

Passage of the ordinance.