



2020 Utility Assistance Status Report

Kent County Essential Needs Task Force
Energy Efficiency Subcommittee



Overview

The Energy Efficiency Subcommittee of the Essential Needs Task Force works to ensure equitable access to utility resources for all people living in Kent County while promoting a culture of energy efficiency. This report highlights the need for financial assistance regarding heat, electricity, and water payments in Kent County over a 12-month period. In this report, payments are divided by utility type – electricity, heat (natural gas and deliverable fuel), and water. Payments are also divided by funding type:

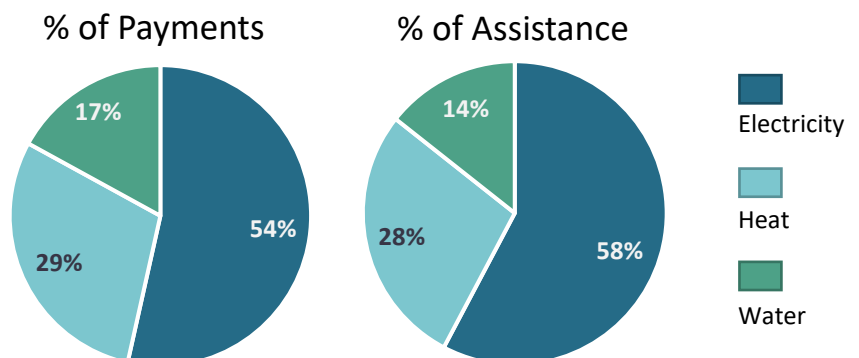
- Michigan Energy Assistance Program (MEAP) funds are supported by the state Low-Income Energy Assistance Fund (LIEAF) and the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).
- COVID funds are from federal and local sources to support households experiencing a hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include Heart of West Michigan United Way's COVID Relief Fund and LIHEAP COVID Related Direct Support Payments.
- Non-MEAP and non-COVID funds include the remainder of funds. State Emergency Relief (SER) funds which are available through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) account for much of the non-MEAP and non-COVID funds in this report. Other sources include the Kent County Senior Millage, Community Service Block Grant Funds, Other Welfare Services County Funds administered by MDHHS, and funds from utility providers.

In 2020, utility assistance agencies in Kent County made just under 11,000 payments for a total of over \$4 million to assist community members in meeting their utility needs and helping to maintain stability.

2020 Data Highlights

Type of Assistance	Total Assistance	Percent of Overall Assistance Provided	Number of Payments	Average Payment
Electric - MEAP funds	\$147,328.07	3.7%	320	\$460.40
Electric - COVID funds	114,248.29	2.9%	185	\$617.56
Electric - non-MEAP/non-COVID funds	2,050,956.18	51.2%	5378	\$381.36
Gas & Fuel - MEAP funds	95,440.05	2.4%	239	\$399.33
Gas & Fuel COVID funds	43,661.59	1.1%	97	\$450.12
Gas & Fuel - non-MEAP/non-COVID funds	979,935.51	24.5%	2907	\$337.10
Water - COVID funds	457,411.55	11.4%	1441	\$317.43
Water - non-COVID funds	117,995.12	2.9%	432	\$273.14
TOTAL	\$4,006,976.36	100%	10999	

When separated by utility type, over half of all payments and assistance were provided to support electricity costs. The average amount per payment for electricity was typically higher than other utility types, so it makes up a slightly greater percentage of the financial assistance provided.

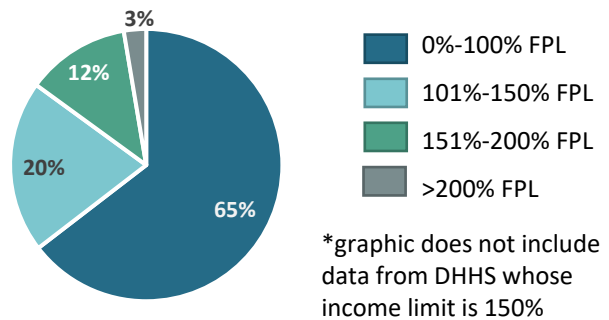




Demographics

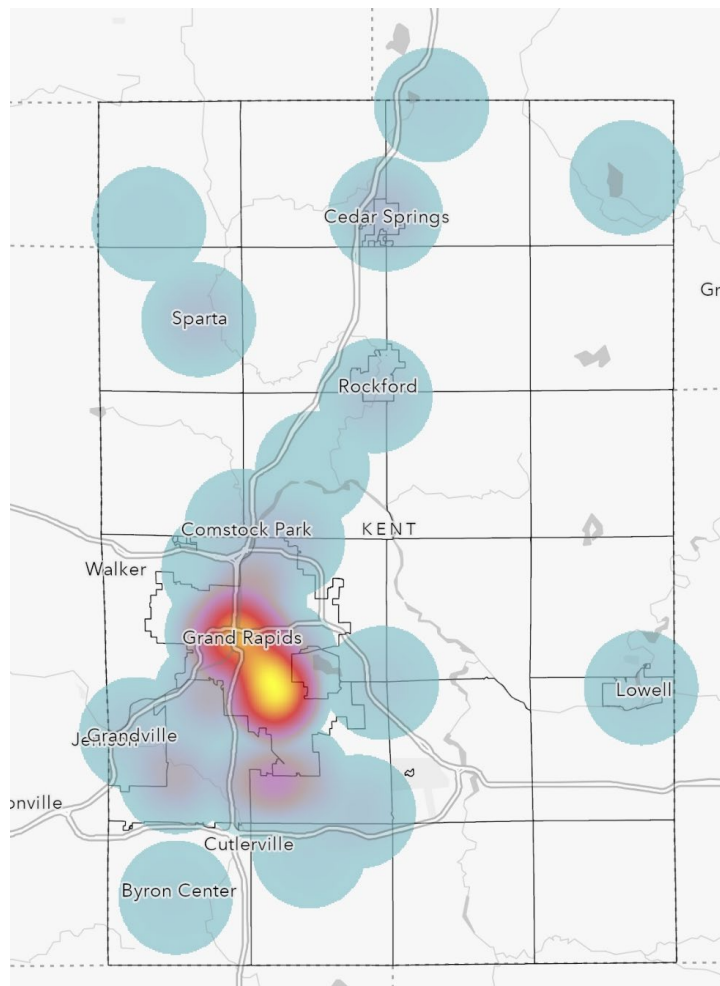
The majority of households who received utility assistance in 2020, from sources other than MDHHS, were under 100% of the Federal Poverty Level. However, we recognize that this measure may be more indicative of the income limits set by funding sources than of the level of need for households at slightly higher income levels. In 2019, 35% of households in Kent County were below the ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) threshold or less than the basic cost of living.

Households below the ALICE Threshold live in every part of the county but are most concentrated in the urban areas of Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming and the rural areas of Cedar Springs, Alpine, and Sparta. These areas also saw a higher concentration of utility assistance in 2020, as shown on the map below.



2020 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) Guidelines

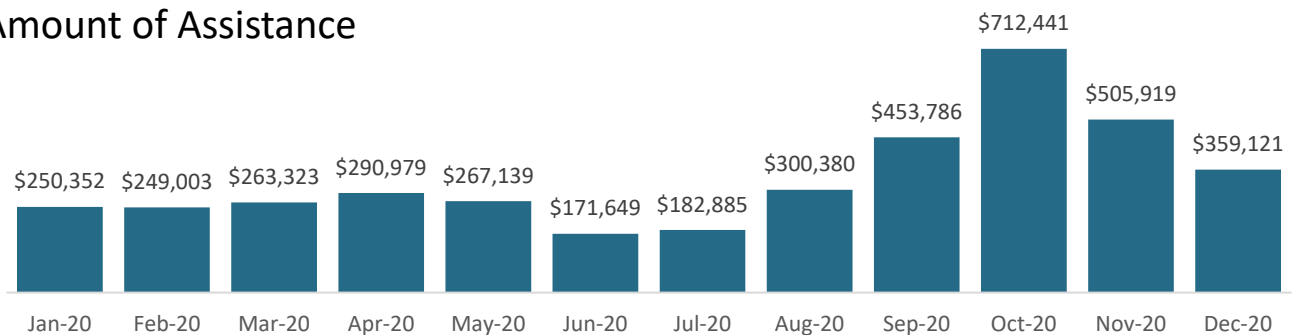
% Of Federal Poverty Level	Annual Household Income	
	1-Person	4-Person
100%	\$12,760	\$26,200
150%	\$19,140	\$39,300
200%	\$25,520	\$52,400



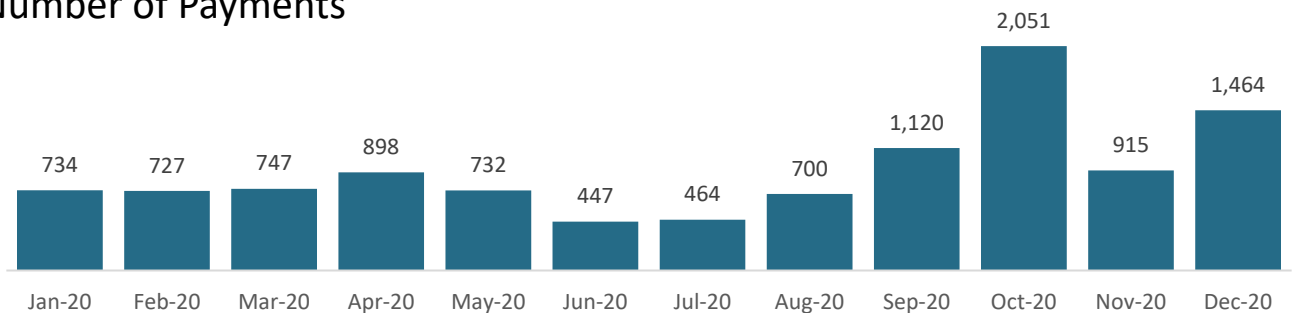


Monthly Trends

Amount of Assistance

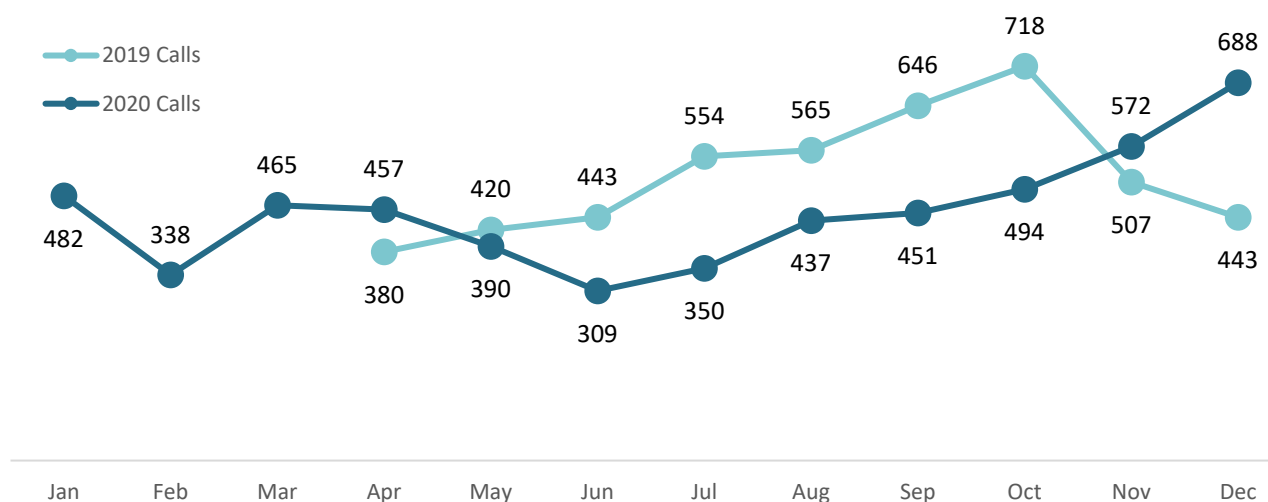


Number of Payments



MEAP funds are allocated to agencies on October 1 of each year, leading to a spike in payments in that month. The monthly trends are also reflected in the number of utility assistance calls that came into 2-1-1 each month. When compared to 2019, there was a lower number of calls in the late spring and summer months of 2020. This is likely due to the utility shutoff moratoria put in place as a result of the pandemic to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Utility Assistance Related Contacts at 2-1-1





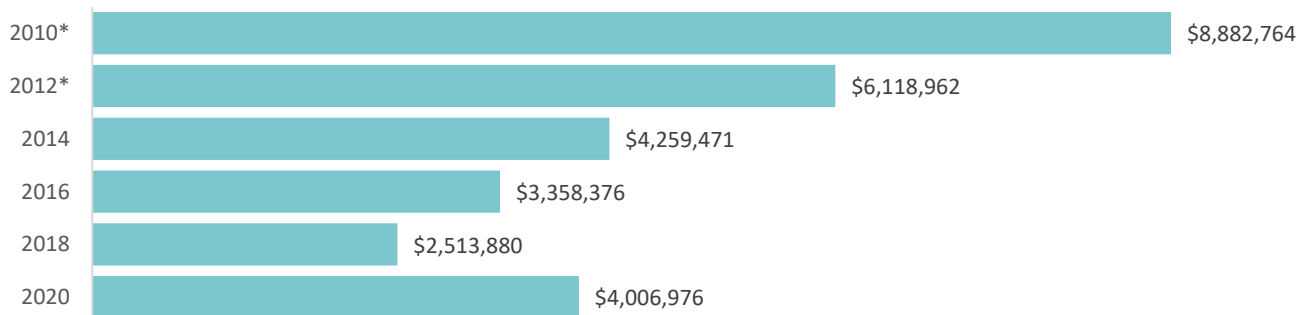
Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic changed so many aspects of everyday life, including the utility assistance system. In response to the pandemic, several changes were implemented, including:

- Increased funding was available from local, state, and federal sources.
- LIHEAP Direct Support Payments were made to utility providers to assist low-income customers with past due amounts. Providers waived 25% of the outstanding bill for households receiving direct payment, allowing for available LIHEAP resources to assist more families. Energy customers at risk of shutoff who receive benefits through Family Independence Program, Food Assistance Program, or Supplemental Security Income were automatically eligible for the direct support payments.
- MDHHS approved several changes to the SER program including the removal of a one payment per fiscal year requirement, an increase in the cap amount that each household can receive per fiscal year, an increase in the non-cash asset limit, the waiver of interview requirements, and the elimination of shortfall co-payment requirements
- Community Service Block Grant increased eligibility from 125% of the federal poverty level to 200%.

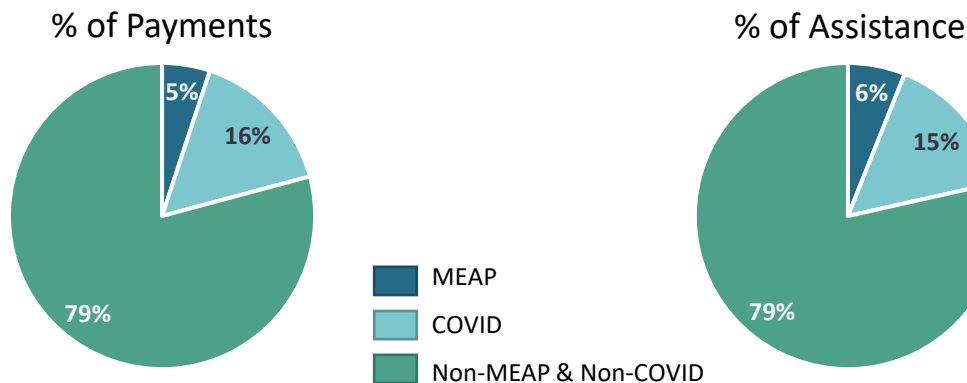
These changes allowed agencies to assist more households, and sometimes provide a higher payment amount, than in previous years. As a result, the amount of assistance funds received by residents in Kent County was at the highest amount since 2015.

Total Utility Assistance Provided Year over Year



*In 2010 - 2012, Michigan received funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). This funding provided additional financial assistance available for utility assistance.

Utility assistance from funds allocated to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and provide relief for households experiencing a hardship made up 16% of all payments (1,724) in 2020 and 15% of the total amount of assistance provided (\$615,598.71).



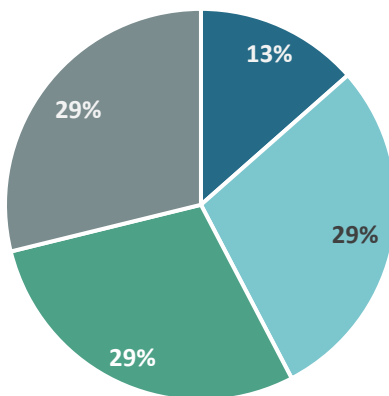


Energy Efficiency & Weatherization

In addition to providing payment assistance, many agencies also provide weatherization services, self-sufficiency coaching, and other learning opportunities regarding overall energy efficiency and financial literacy to equip households to reduce their overall energy usage and to achieve and maintain stable utility accounts.

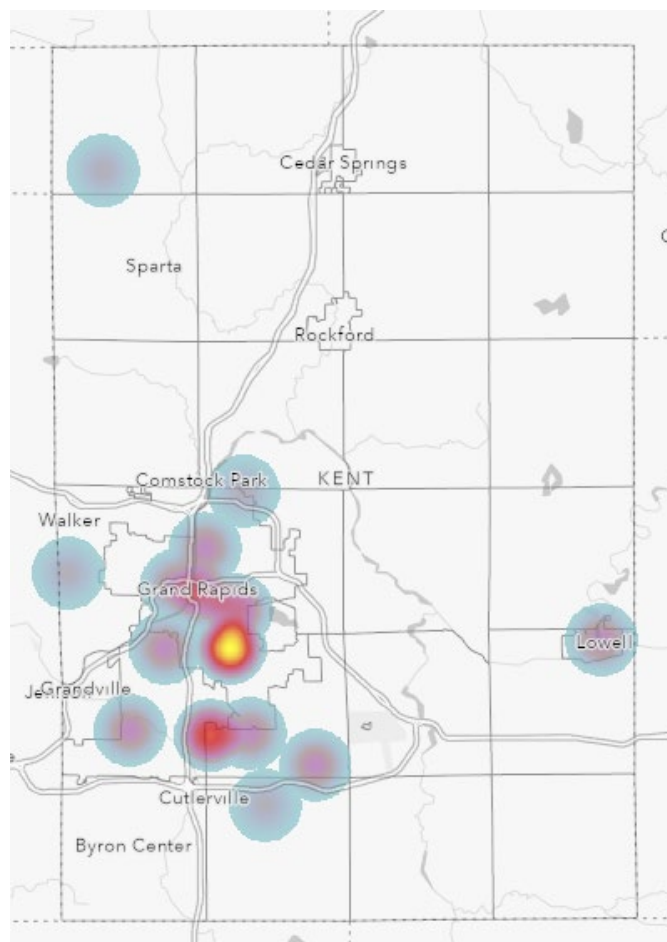


In 2020, 727 households received self-sufficiency coaching, 60 had an energy audit completed, and 47 received weatherization services. 163 weatherization measures were installed, totaling \$217,000.



Weatherization Service Types Provided

- Mechanical Measures
- Building Shell Materials
- Electric & Water Measures
- Health & Safety Measures



Similar to utility assistance, weatherization assistance is concentrated in the lower income urban and rural areas of Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood, Sparta, Lowell.



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Data Sources

The data included in this report was submitted by the below agencies. Together, these organizations and those below provide utility payment assistance, weatherization and energy efficiency assistance, and community referrals to support thousands of households across Kent County.



Additional ENTIF Energy Efficiency Subcommittee Partners

