



Kent County
**Essential Needs
Task Force**

Energy Efficiency

Utility Assistance and
Weatherization Services

2024 Status Report

Introduction

The Kent County Essential Needs Task Force (ENTF) Energy Efficiency Committee envisions a system where utilities use renewable energy and address environmental concerns, homes are energy efficient, and all people in Kent County have consistent and affordable utility services to support household wellbeing. In service of this vision, member agencies that provide utility payment assistance and weatherization services share data with ENTF. Their data is aggregated in this report for a comprehensive look at the services provided in 2023.

Data for this report was provided by:

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS)
The Salvation Army of Kent County
Kent County Community Action (KCCA)
Senior Neighbors
North Kent Connect
Flat River Outreach Ministries (FROM)
Heart of West Michigan United Way 2-1-1

Most people access utility payment assistance by applying for State Emergency Relief (SER), which is administered by MDHHS. Qualifying for SER is a requirement for the Michigan Energy Assistance Program (MEAP). Local MEAP providers include KCCA and The Salvation Army. The other agencies that provide utility payment assistance include Senior Neighbors, FROM, and North Kent Connect. In addition, these agencies help people apply for SER, enroll in affordable payment plans through their utility companies and access weatherization services.

Weatherization services include building shell measures, electric and water measures, health and safety measures and mechanical measures. These measures make homes more efficient, which in turn lowers the cost of utility bills, making payments more affordable. KCCA is the only participating agency that provides weatherization services. In 2023, they had capacity to serve 50-60 households.

Over 85% of the funding for utility assistance and weatherization services is from SER, other funding sources include **MEAP at 4.9%**, **Low-Income Households Water Assistance Program at 3.1%**, **Individual Circuit Breaker Assistance Program at 2.9%** (ICBAP), **Community Service Block Grant at 1.5%**, **private grants or donations at 0.6%**, and **Kent County Senior Millage at 0.4%**.

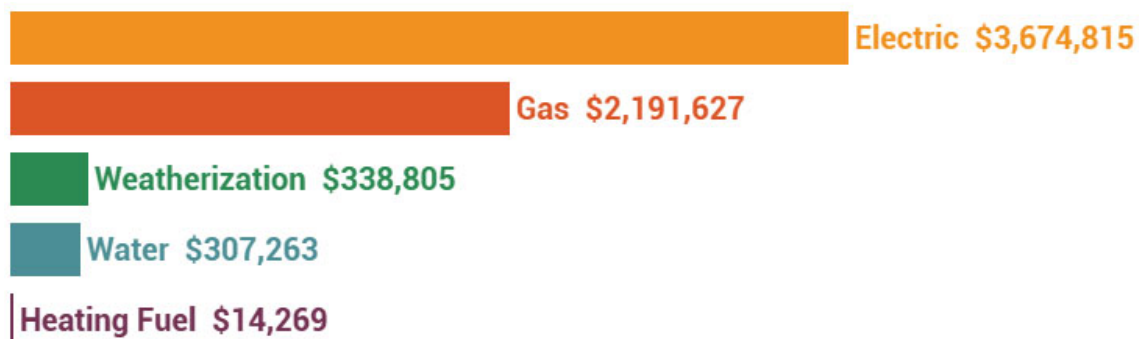


ICBAP was the only program with money remaining at the end of the funding cycle. This program is only available to Grand Rapids water and/or sewer system customers.

Several agencies were not able to provide the amount of funding available for these services because their funding was for a larger region than Kent County or for a program that included additional services, like rental assistance. In these cases, the agencies' total payment amount was used as a proxy for their funding amount. Each agency in this situation had only one funding source and reported that they were able to utilize all their funding.

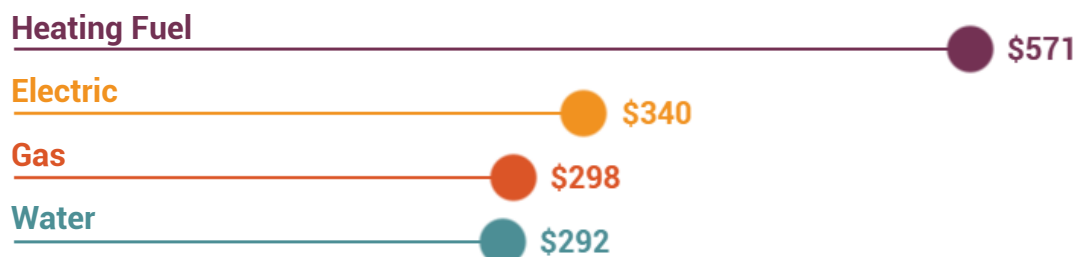
Payment Amounts

In 2023, households in Kent County received over \$6 million in utility assistance payments and over \$300,000 in weatherization services.



All participating agencies were able to provide the amount of payment assistance in 2023 by utility. However, some agencies could not separate heating fuel and gas. Under these circumstances, heating fuel payment amounts were reported as gas. This means that the actual gas payment amount is lower than shown here and the actual heating fuel payment amount is higher.

The average payment amount was \$375 and ranged by utility from \$292-\$571.



Number of Payments

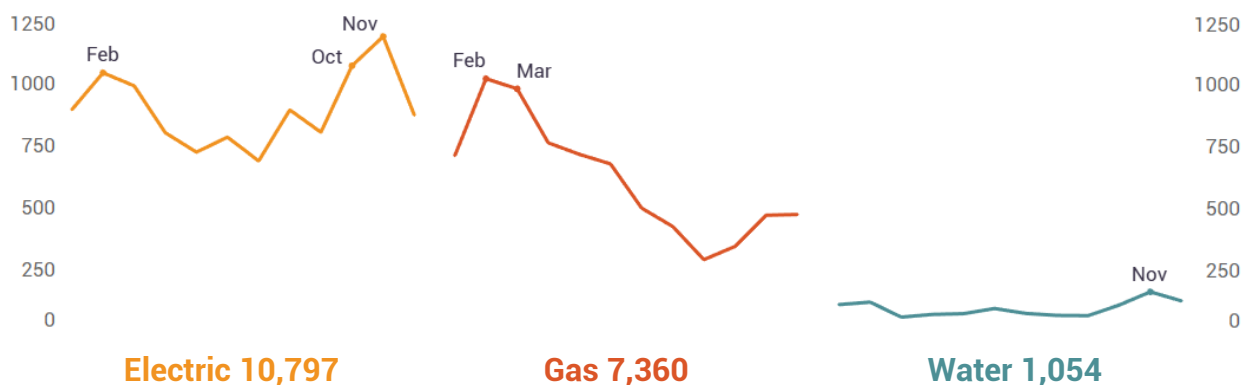
Most of the participating providers were unable to provide the number of unique households served by utility. Therefore, this report will look at the number of payments made as the closest available proxy for households served by utility. Please note that a household may have received more than one type of payment assistance or may have received payment assistance more than once.

In 2023, providers made 19,236 utility assistance payments in Kent County.



All participating agencies were able to provide the number of payments made in 2023 by utility. However, some agencies could not separate heating fuel and gas. Under these circumstances, heating fuel payments were reported as gas. This means that the actual number of gas payments is lower than shown here and the actual number of heating fuel payments is higher.

When looking at the number of payments by month, we see peaks in February, March, October, and November.

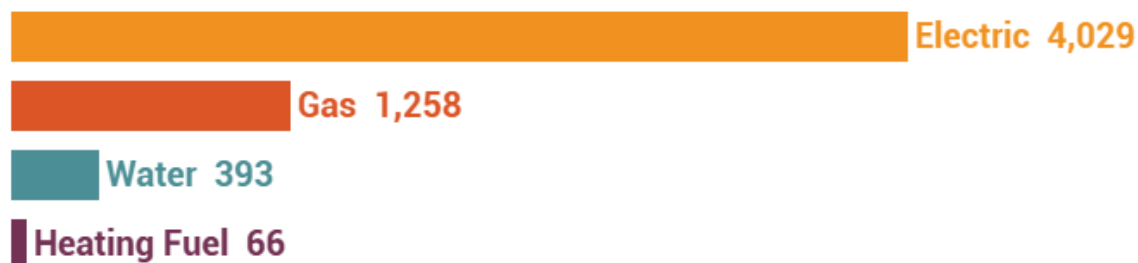


The peaks in October and November might be explained by the funding cycles that begin on October 1. SER and MEAP funds are often depleted by September, so there can be a backlog of requests at the start of the funding cycle. The reason for the peaks in February and March is unknown but may be connected to winter heating needs.

2-1-1 Calls

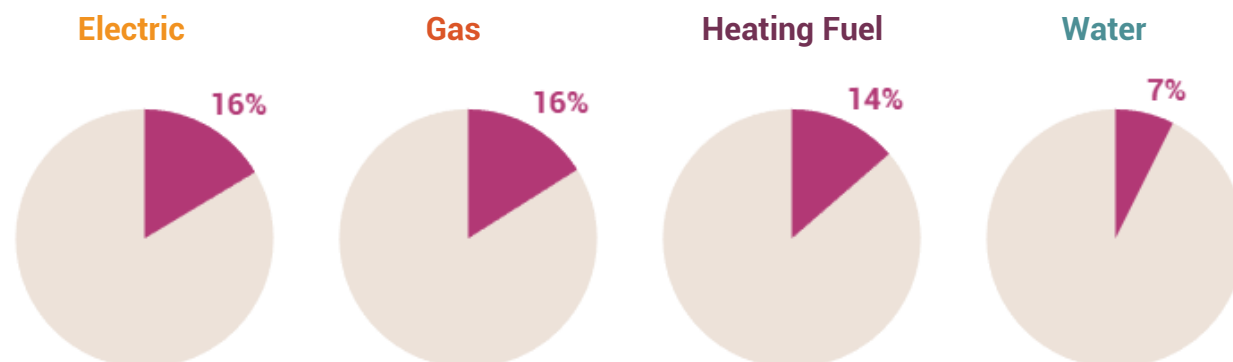
2-1-1 is a free and confidential service that connects people with help from resources in their community. While many people connect with programs without a referral from 2-1-1, looking at 2-1-1 call data provides some insight into the demand for these utility assistance payments and the capacity of local agencies to meet that demand.

In 2023, 2-1-1 received almost 5,750 requests for utility payment assistance in Kent County, with 70% for electric, 22% for gas, 7% for water and 1% for heating fuel.



The number of requests received by 2-1-1 is much lower than the number of utility assistance payments made by service providers. However, not all callers received assistance. When there are no resources available for a caller, 2-1-1 refers to this as an unmet need.

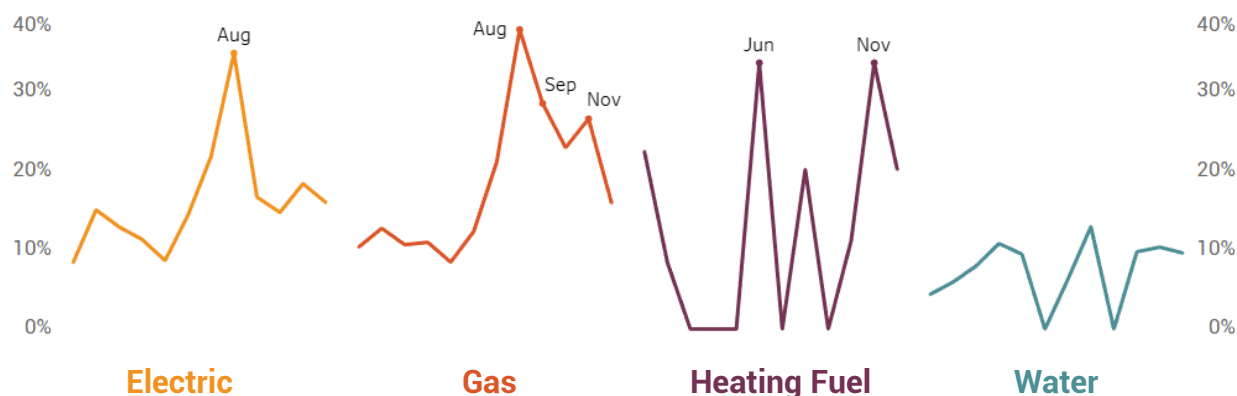
In 2023, 7-16% of 2-1-1 requests for utility payment assistance were **unmet needs.**



These **unmet needs** represent over 900 requests for utility payment assistance. The reason these specific needs were unmet is unknown; however, some of the likely reasons include not meeting the eligibility requirements and limits on available funding. SER and MEAP both require household income to be under 150% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In addition, SER caps utility assistance payments at \$350 for water, \$850 for electric and gas, and \$1,200 for heating fuel.

Many programs use household income limits above 100% FPL because this measure is woefully inadequate. United for ALICE has developed measures that give a more comprehensive picture of financial hardship by county based on the cost of living. In Kent County, a family of four would need an income over 220% FPL just to make ends meet and over 350% FPL to experience financial stability.

When we look at the percentage of unmet needs by month, we see spikes of over 25% in June, August, September, and November.



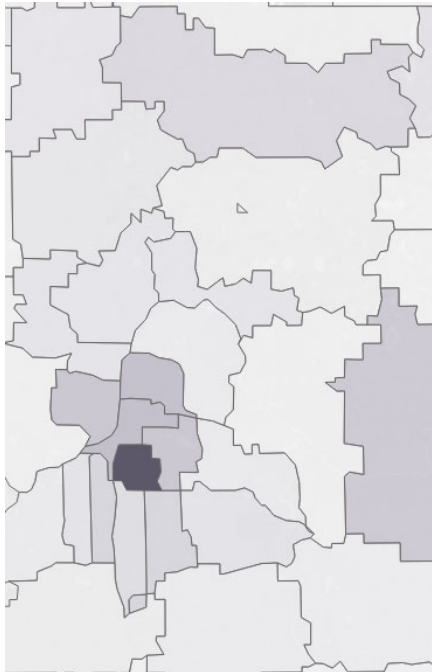
It is important to understand that to be eligible for electric or gas assistance through SER, a household must have received a past due notice. Some households wait until they have received multiple notices or have had their utilities shut off before seeking assistance. Thus, there can be a delay of a few months from the time a household becomes eligible to when they seek payment assistance.

Household Demographics

All participating service providers, except the largest (MDHHS), were able to provide data on the number of households they served by zip code. Without data from MDHHS, we can make only limited conclusions about this data. Please note that household data is not deduplicated. Different agencies may have served the same household; therefore, that household's data may have been reported by multiple agencies. Since the data was reported in aggregate and individual households were not identifiable, there is no way to know how many households are duplicated in this data.

To contextualize the number of households served, they are shown as a percentage of the total number of households in each respective zip code. This data (total number of households by 5-digit zip code tabulation area) is from the 2020 Census.

49507 had the largest percentage of households (HH) served.



Zip Code	HH Served
49507	3.74%
49331, 49503, 49504, 49505, and 49506	0.75-1%
49319, 49326, 49508, 49509, 49512, 49519, and 49548	0.25-0.5%
All Others	<0.25%

This is not surprising because 49507 is a geography of focus for many local programs. To get a clearer picture of the need in Kent County, ENTf would like to know the number of households receiving past due notices by zip code, along with households served by zip code by MDHHS. This missing data would tell a more robust story of how utility assistance is helping households in Kent County make ends meet.

When we look at the percentage of households served by income, without data from MDHHS, we see that less than one in six households served have an income over 150% FPL, and almost two-thirds of households served have incomes under 100% FPL.



$\frac{2}{3}$ of households served have incomes under 100% FPL.

$\frac{1}{6}$ of households served have incomes over 150% FPL.

If we include DHHS data, we see that almost 99% of households served have an income under 150% FPL.

Conclusion

Existing utility payment assistance programs are vital to supporting households in Kent County. The funding available is routinely used in its entirety, as it was in 2023, with the exception of ICBAP. Still, there are many unmet needs according to the 2-1-1 call data. Many households experiencing financial instability are ineligible for these services based on income limits. Of the households that are eligible, many find the support available to be insufficient.

Several members of the ENTF Energy Efficiency Committee are part of a coalition advocating to enhance MEAP, so that it can play a larger role in the need for utility payment assistance. There is legislation currently under consideration that would do three key things. First, it would raise the household income limit from 150% FPL to 200% FPL. Second, it would remove the current statewide funding cap of \$50 million. Finally, it would raise the utility ratepayer surcharge that funds MEAP, currently limited to \$1 per electric meter, to \$2 per meter. These changes would make MEAP accessible to more households by allowing more households to be eligible for assistance and substantially increasing the amount of funding available statewide.

Data Sources

In addition to the organizations that provided data directly to ENTF, data was also retrieved from the following sources:

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). Decennial Census, DEC Demographic Profile, Table DP1. Retrieved from www.data.census.gov

United for ALICE. (2022). Michigan County Reports 2022, ALICE in Kent County. Retrieved from www.unitedforalice.org/county-reports/michigan

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