

Energy assistance customer journey: Mapping and improving the experience for low-income customers

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We know utilities.

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Mission

The Low Income Energy Issues Forum's mission is to conduct research on utility bill affordability, share information, and identify solutions among a diverse group of professionals.

LIEIF is a unique group of professionals focused on energy affordability. The members work for:

- Utilities (both municipal and investor-owned)
- State regulatory and social service agencies
- Research institutions
- Consumer organizations
- National associations and other nonprofit organizations
- Creative, analytical, and software businesses

Challenge statement

Created in 2013, we adopted this challenge statement:

- Propose innovative and integrated policies and approaches that help close the widening gap between what vulnerable energy consumers can pay and their current utility bills.

Current utility members



Speakers



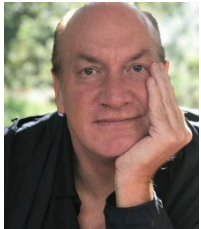
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Today's webinar

Customers are increasingly relying on energy assistance, but the current customer experience (CX) process can be frustrating, time-consuming, and costly for all parties. There's a clear business case, regulatory driver, and customer need to get this process right.

Let's explore how we can use customer journey mapping to better understand and overcome the process and administrative hurdles low- and moderate-income (LMI) customers face when they identify, apply, enroll, and maintain enrollment in energy assistance and other utility affordability offerings.

Today's agenda

- Discuss the Low Income Energy Issues Forum's previous customer journey mapping
- Review insights from the E Source Customer Experience Leadership Council workshops
- Highlight E Source market research about LMI customers' journeys
- Track LMI customers' journeys throughout disconnection moratoriums
- Share the E Source LMI customer journey mapping multiclient study

Energy affordability challenges

Industry-wide energy affordability challenges

- **Energy burden.** Over 60% of low-income households in the U.S. face a high energy burden, with some paying more than 20% of their income on utility bills.
- **Energy insecurity.** 27% of all households report some sort of energy insecurity, leading them to forego other necessities to pay an energy bill or to maintain their home at an unsafe temperature.
- **Energy debt.** Over half of income-qualified customers report trouble paying their electric bill and almost one-third of customers have been disconnected at least once in the past 12 months or are in debt to their utility.

Industry-wide energy affordability challenges

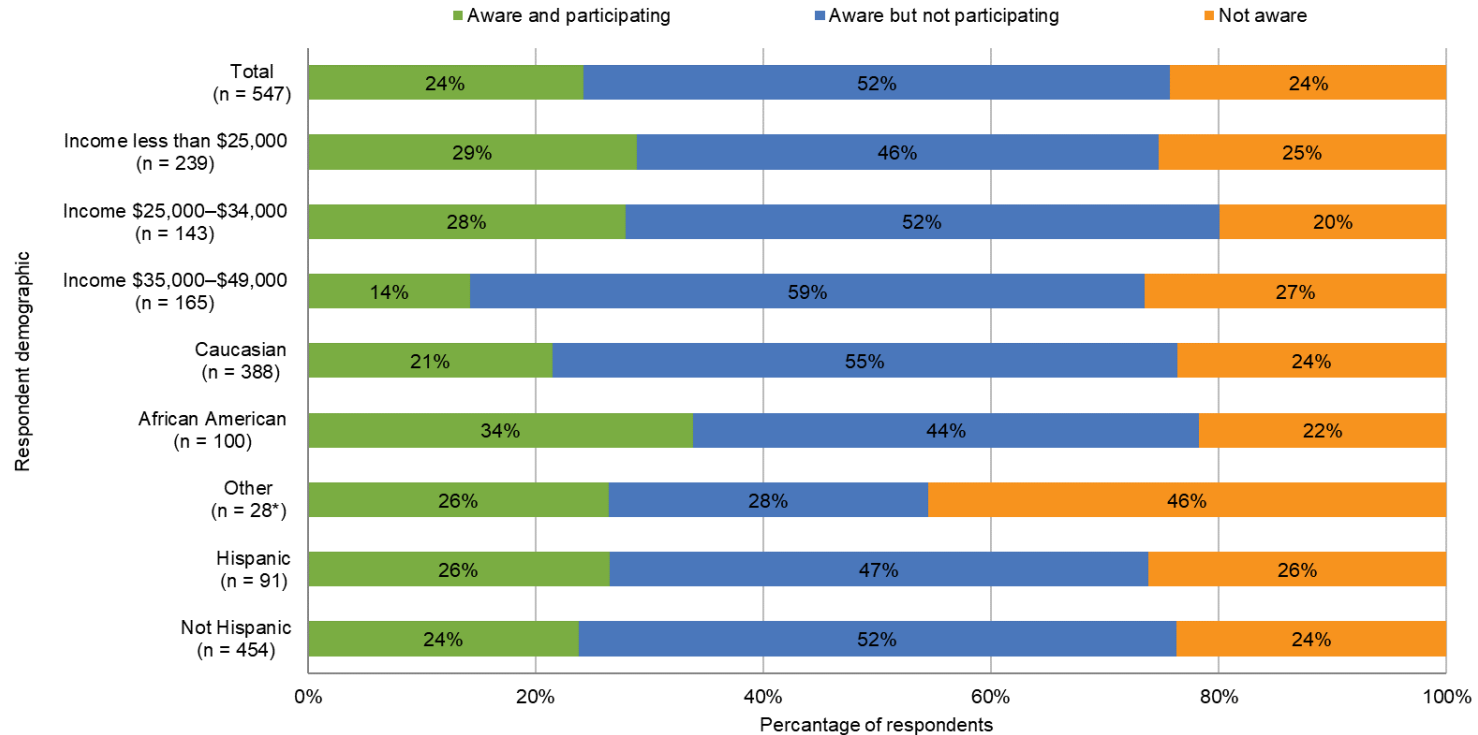
- **Energy assistance.** “Millions of eligible households are not receiving any assistance and most states have less than 20% participation in LIHEAP.”
- **Energy efficiency.** “Demand-side management (DSM) programs for income-qualified customers are reaching just a small fraction (5%) of households that need assistance.”

Lack of awareness a major customer barrier

Reason	Income				Race			Ethnicity	
	Total (n = 547)	Under \$25,000 (n = 239) -A-	\$25,000– \$34,000 (n = 143) -B-	\$35,000– \$49,000 (n = 165) -C-	Caucasian (n = 388) -D-	African American (n = 100) -E-	Other (n = 28*) -F-	Hispanic (n = 91)	Not Hispanic (n = 454)
Wasn't aware of program	33%	27%	38%	26%	31%	31%	23%	24%	31%
Don't own my property	23%	22%	27%	21%	24%	20%	23%	27%	22%
Too expensive	21%	22%	19%	21%	19%	22%	29%	22%	20%
Not offered by my utility	18%	14%	21%	20%	19%	12%	21%	24%	16%
Couldn't get enough information	18%	19%	13%	19%	16%	23%	10%	26%	16%
No good match for my needs	13%	12%	15%	12%	12%	21%	10%	5%	14%
No interest	11%	15%	6%	9%	9%	15%	21%	11%	11%
Inconvenient/too much of a time commitment	10%	9%	11%	10%	7%	18%	16%	12%	10%
Other	2%	2%	1%	3%	3%	1%	-	2%	2%
None of the above	11%	11%	11%	10%	9%	15%	10%	11%	10%

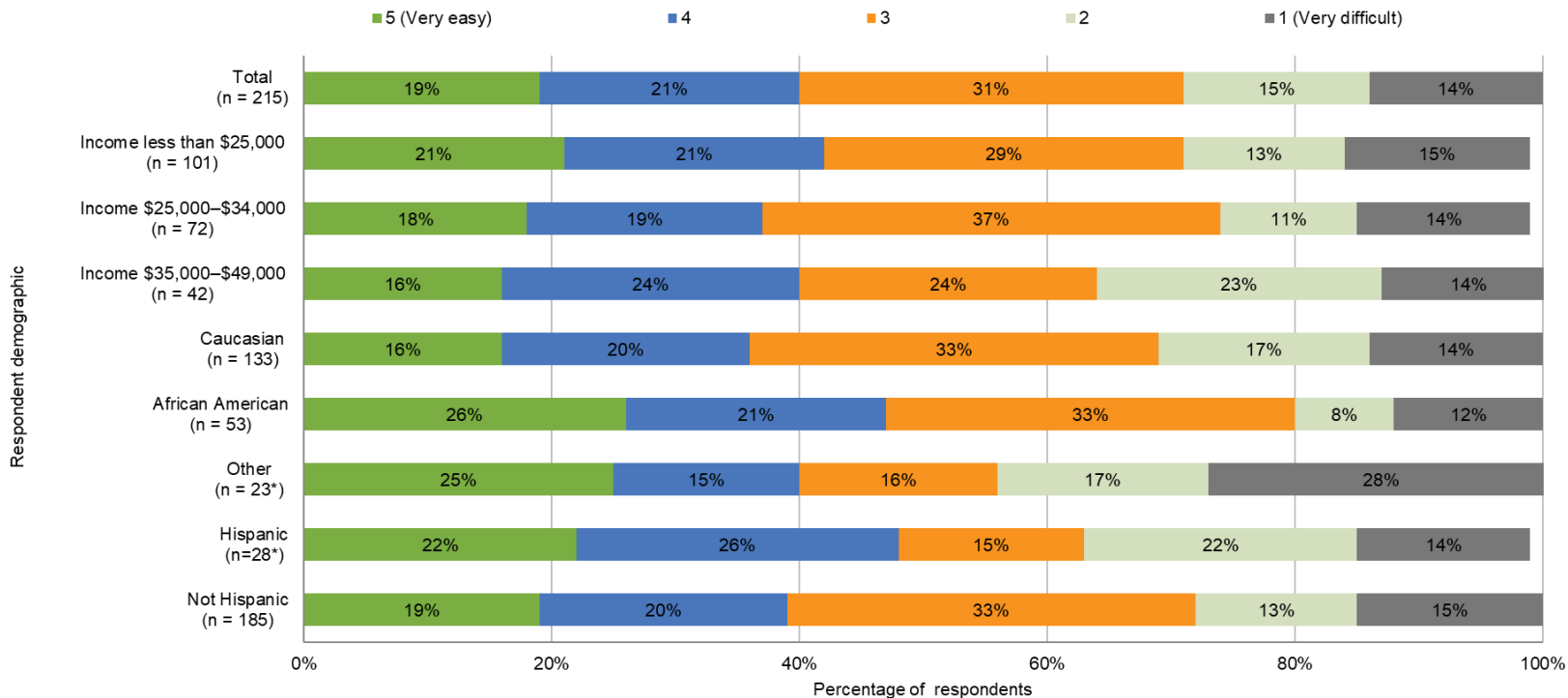
© E Source (2024 Low Income Energy Issues Forum annual survey). **Base:** Total pay utility bills (n varies as shown). **Question H13:** What are the biggest challenges that are preventing you from participating in your utility's home energy savings program? **Note:** *Use caution with small sample size.

LMI customer program awareness



© E Source. **Base:** Total pay utility bills (n varies). **Question:** Some households are eligible to receive utility bill assistance to help pay utility bills, like the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Regardless of whether your household might qualify, how familiar are you with these types of utility billing assistance programs? **Note:** *Use caution with small sample size. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Ease of enrollment



© E Source. **Base:** Total ever enrolled/tried to enroll in an energy assistance program (n = 215). **Question:** How easy or difficult was it to apply and receive energy assistance to help pay your utility bills? **Notes:** *Use caution with small sample size. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Reasons for not applying for utility payment assistance

Reason	Income				Race			Ethnicity	
	Total (n = 371)	Under \$25,000 (n = 148) -A-	\$25,000– \$34,000 (n = 99) -B-	\$35,000– \$49,000 (n = 124) -C-	Caucasian (n = 261) -D-	African American (n = 61) -E-	Other (n = 33) -F-	Hispanic (n = 61)	Not Hispanic (n = 308)
I'm not eligible for energy assistance	36%	22%	37%	51%	43%	19%	25%	19%	39%
I wasn't aware that energy assistance was available	33%	33%	41%	27%	30%	34%	43%	51%	30%
I didn't know where to go to start the application process	18%	23%	15%	14%	16%	23%	25%	20%	18%
I found the application process to be confusing and difficult	7%	12%	3%	4%	5%	20%	3%	5%	7%
I didn't have the paperwork or other documentation available to apply	5%	6%	4%	5%	4%	9%	6%	6%	5%
Don't know	15%	20%	14%	10%	14%	13%	24%	18%	14%

© E Source (2024 Low Income Energy Issues Forum annual survey). **Base:** Total have not enrolled/tried to enroll in energy assistance program (n varies as shown). **Question H8:** Why haven't you applied for energy assistance to help pay your utility bills?

What's customer journey mapping?

Current-state journey mapping

Current-state journey mapping reveals what customers are going through during an interaction with the utility.

Future-state journey mapping

Future-state journey mapping establishes what the ideal experience could be.

What's customer journey mapping?

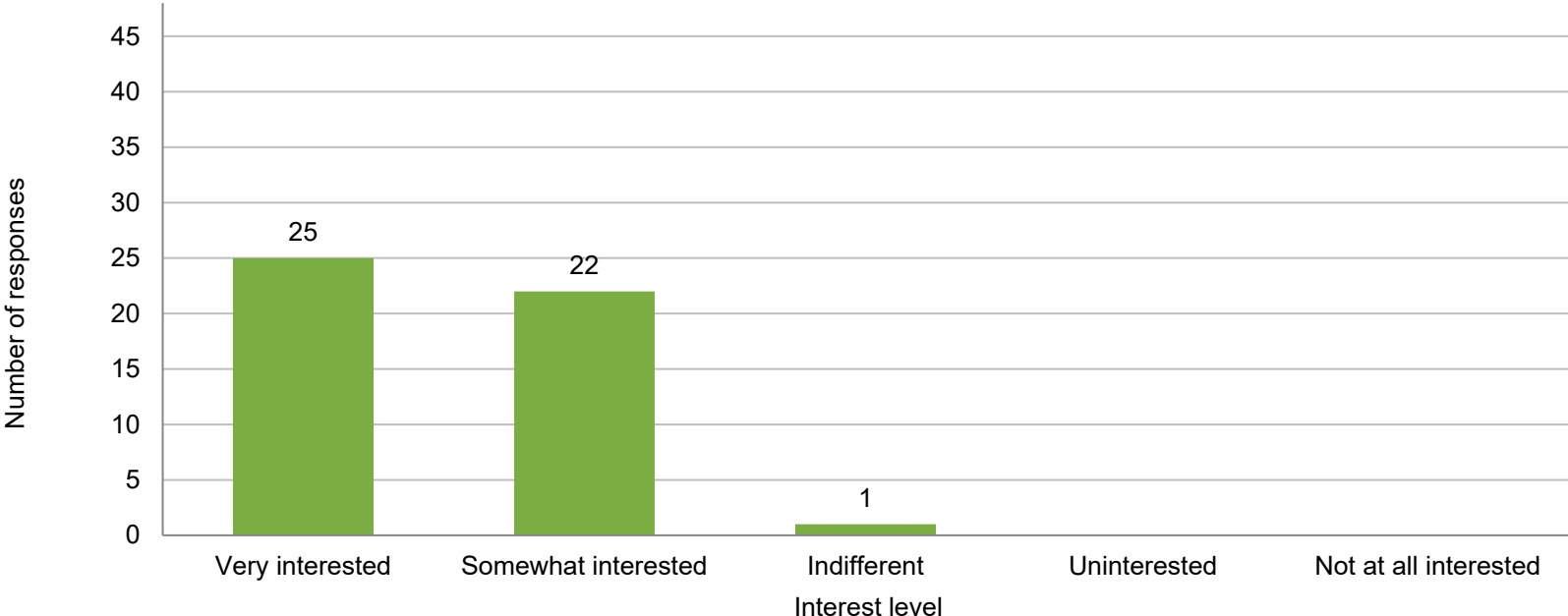
Journey mapping will help you identify small, easy-to-carry-out ideas and larger, more-costly ones.

- Helps utilities understand what their customers think and feel during utility interactions.
- Breaks down abstract CX ideas into bite-sized pieces with concrete steps for improvement.
- Requires people in your organization to put themselves in the customers' shoes.
- Shows the current state of the customer experience and encourages wide-reaching changes in an organization.

Poll: How interested are you in customer journey mapping around energy assistance?

- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Indifferent
- Uninterested
- Not at all interested

Poll: How interested are you in customer journey mapping around energy assistance?



© E Source. **Base:** n = 48. **Question:** How interested are you in customer journey mapping around energy assistance?

Previous Low Income Energy Issues Forum LMI customer journey mapping

2019 low-income journey mapping project

Project context

- Take a critical look at assistance process
- Help utility's service model to better serve customers and agency partners
- Engage five utilities in the customer immersion phase of a project

Research process

- Foundational research
- Stakeholder interviews
- Focus groups
- Customer interviews
- Customer journey map
- Action workshop and reports

2019 journey mapping phases

Discovery

- Stakeholder interviews
- Research review
- Hypothesis mapping

Customer immersion

- 25 interviews with customers from five utilities

Action

- Insights report
- Journey maps
- Action workshop

Customer goals

Inexperienced low-income energy assistance applicants

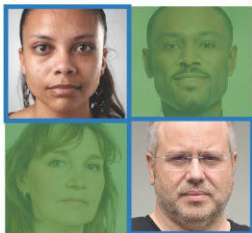
- “Make sure I get help quickly so my power won’t be cut.”
- Understand how the process.

“ How am I going to get the money to pay this? When you get a shut off notice or anything that type of nature, the first thing in your mind is like, oh my God, what am I going to do?”

Experienced low-income energy assistance applicants

- “Make sure my benefits are available for the new year.”
- Be able to recertify quickly.

“ It’s just like applying for a loan at the bank, you walk in, you go through the interview and you give them the information. In my case because I’ve done it for so many years, I’m used to it.”



Navigating the system for the first time

The Inexperienced Low-Income Energy Assistance Applicant

“ How am I going to get the money to pay this? When you get a shutoff notice or anything of that nature, the first thing in your mind is like, oh my God, what am I going to do?”

PERSONA'S GOALS

- Make sure I get help quickly so my power won't be cut.
- Understand how the process works.

Map Guide

- Moment of Truth**—An activity that has a disproportionate impact on the customer's perception of the experience.
- Friction Point**—An activity that provokes negative emotions or an exit from journey.
- Journey Touchpoint**
- Waiting for Update**
- Complication**

Participating Utilities

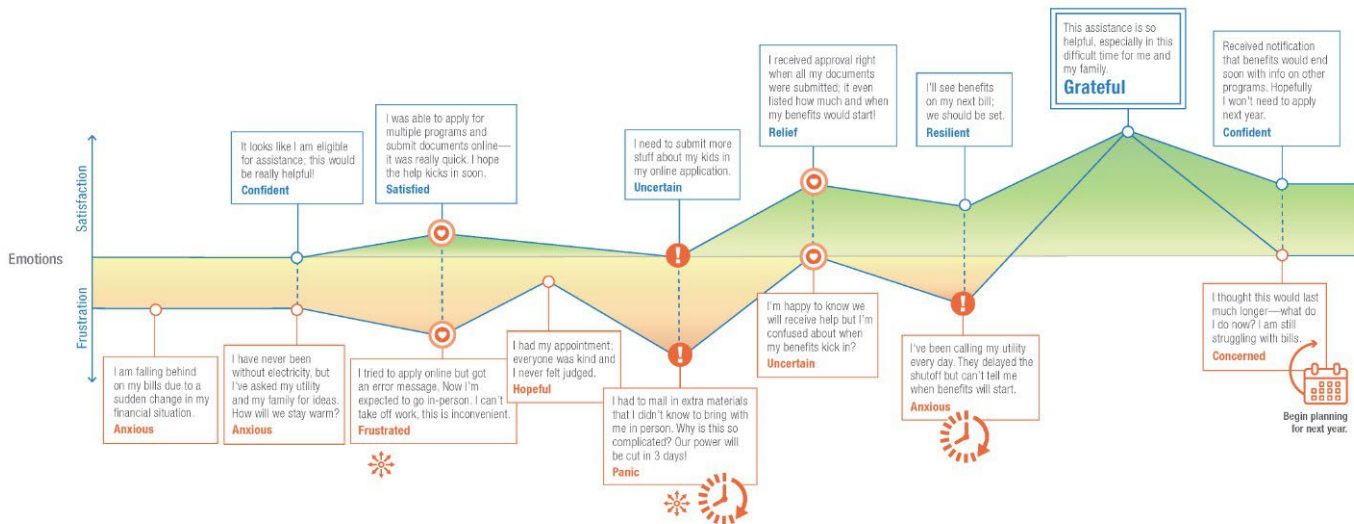
- BGE
- Citizens Energy Group
- FirstEnergy
- National Grid
- PECO

ABOUT THIS PERSONA

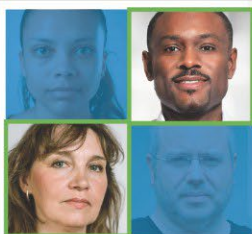
- Usage History** First-time program user. May have been eligible at an earlier date, but was unaware that they qualified.
- Triggering Event** Loss of income, illness, or retirement death puts an unexpected strain on finances.
- Key Insights** Struggles with the application process and has confusion about all of the documents required to obtain approval. Does little research and learns as-they-go.



Phases	Finding Help		Going Through the Process		Gaining Access		Program is Active	
Steps	Event	Becoming Aware	Application	Waiting for approval	Approval	Waiting for benefits to start	Receiving benefits	Current year's benefits end



Ineffective Processes	Shutoff notice mailed with minimal information on programs.	Complicated online process for first time applicants; in-person appointment needed.	Miscommunication—items lost in mail or confusion on requirements.	Letter of approval mailed, but with no details on amount or timeframe.	No information about benefit details or delays relayed to the customer.	Benefits stop unexpectedly, unclear why.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify customers who fall behind certain threshold amounts and offer plenty of resources and time to prevent shutoffs. • Provide clear and easy-to-understand instructions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline application process by coordinating with agencies and other programs. • Try to funnel new applicants through online application. • Use existing data to prefill and reach out to applicants via phone to obtain what is missing. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide updates to applicants in a push format, based on customer preference (text/email, letter, phone). • Provide updates on when assistance will start and how recipient will know it has started. • Also offer channel to check status online or receive a text. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If an applicant is close to being shutoff but benefits haven't kicked in yet, delay the shut off for those who have an application in good standing.



Working through the process every year

The Experienced Low-Income Energy Assistance Applicant

“It’s just like applying for a loan at the bank, you walk in, you go through the interview and you give them the information. In my case, because I’ve done it for so many years, I’m used to it.”

ABOUT THIS PERSONA

- Usage History** Has been using public assistance programs such as this for 10+ years.
- Triggering Event** Originally had a triggering event many years ago (retirement, loss of income, illness) and has not been able to fully rebound.
- Key Insights** Is organized and pro-active with the application and payment processes, and has learned how to avoid having the energy shut off when funds are especially low.



PERSONA'S GOALS

- Make sure benefits are available for the new year.
- Be able to re-certify quickly.

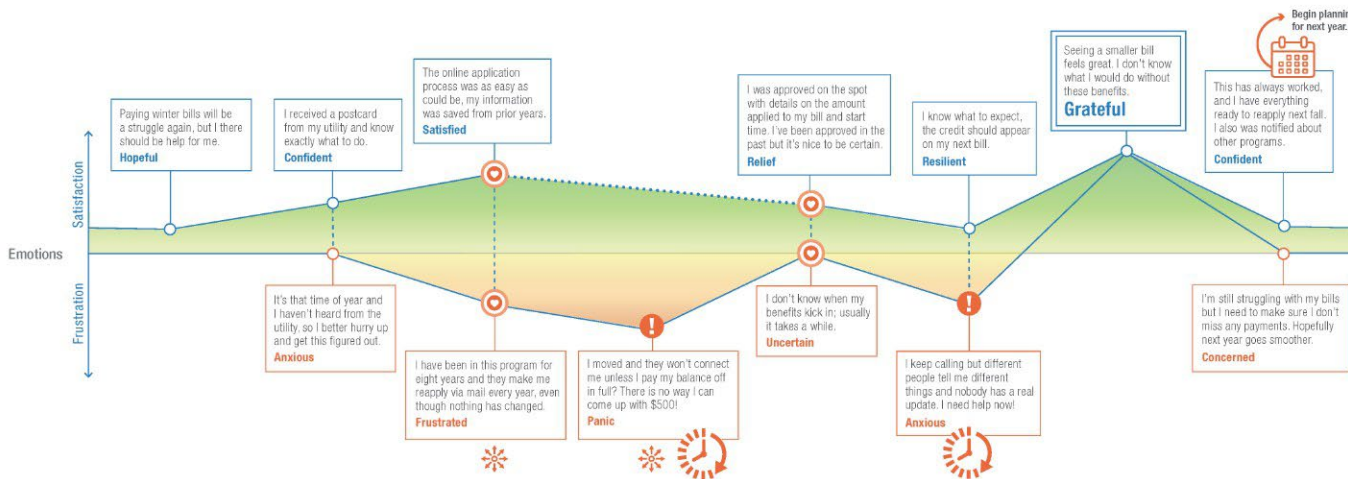
Map Guide

- Moment of Truth**—An activity that has a disproportionate impact on the customer’s perception of the experience.
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- Waiting for Update**
- Complication**

Participating Utilities

- BGE
- Citizens Energy Group
- FirstEnergy
- National Grid
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Phases	Finding Help		Going Through the Process		Gaining Access		Program is Active	
Steps	Need	Becoming Aware	Application	Waiting for approval	Approval	Waiting for benefits to start	Receiving benefits	Current year’s benefits end



Ineffective Processes	No formal notification process for past program users.	Application must be mailed in or submitted in person.	Complications like moving or applications lost in the mail can delay approval.	After long delay, approval is sent but without any detail on amount and timing.	Benefits take a long time to kick in, with insufficient notifications/updates.	Benefits stop unexpectedly, with no explanation.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify existing participants of program changes ahead of time and suggest alternative programs/support if existing benefits are cut. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline application process by coordinating with agencies and other programs. • Offer online application and prefill with existing data, but keep traditional phone and mail formats. • Limit in-person visits. • Provide updates on application process, when decision will be made, amounts, and length of assistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide updates to applicants in a push format, based on customer preference (text/email, letter, phone). • Provide updates on assistance start date and how recipient will know it has started. • Offer channel to check status online or receive a text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorten the window of time applicants need to wait for funds to be applied to their accounts. • Auto enroll in summer electricity benefits program if qualified. • Send information on additional programs that customers may qualify for. 		

Key themes



Awareness comes through efforts by utilities, community groups, and personal networks



Application process is confusing and burdensome for new or “inexperience” applicants, easy for “experienced” applicants



The lack of updates and communication is frustrating



Customer are thankful for the programs exist, but they're frustrated with the process



Digital communication is good, but utilities need to diversify their approach

Leadership Council insights on LMI customer journeys

Spring 2024 Customer Experience Leadership Council journey workshop

- 35 utility CX leaders gathered in Chicago
 - Representation included Chief Customer Officers and CX, digital channel, and contact center directors.
 - Attendees collaborated and addressed the hypothetical question:

How would you strengthen the ability to pay if you could not disconnect or collect from your most vulnerable customers?

The persona

Tammy

- Lives in Los Angeles in multifamily housing
- Is over 50
- Makes under \$50,000
- Suffers from anemia, making heating a top concern



Other concerns for Tammy

- She's behind on both electric and gas bills, but she's prioritizing paying the gas bill due to health concerns.
 - She also struggles with the high costs of rent and lack of efficiency in her home.
- She applied for assistance the previous year, but she was told she made too much money to qualify.
- She's previously experienced homelessness, so paying her housing costs are a priority.

Tammy's journey



Little help is given before she gets behind on bills

10 days until ...



Brief window to act before disconnection

Contact information largely not updated in move from landline to mobile phones

Self service?



Referred to an agency



One call resolution?

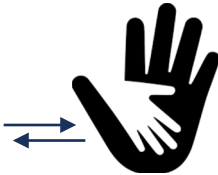
Multiple follow up calls, increasing cost to serve



Take the day off work

Bus/car ride into far neighborhood

Must have all your paperwork



Different experience depending on the agencies and the county

Advising on:

- LIHEAP
- Utility programs
- Food, shelter, and healthcare programs

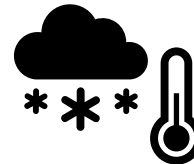
Training / program knowledge varies

Back and forth to get customer's utility account information

Utility program funding may be exhausted in Q3

Energy efficiency and weatherization programs may have a two-year waiting list

Putting customers on a payment plan may jeopardize their eligibility for other benefits



Step one: Usage and billing

- Offer tools to track daily usage, proactively notify customers when bills are above a threshold

- Promote programs that could help control costs, like prepay, level pay, fixed rate

- Simplify the bill, use customer-friendly language, and explain what's fixed versus controllable

- Create a “utility 101” for new customers to educate them on programs, billing, usage, tools

- Autoenroll qualifying customers in bill assistance programs when starting service

Step 2: Payment

- **Segment by propensity to pay or past payment behavior and customize payment options (autopay, text-to-pay, etc.)**

- **Have clear messaging with your online payments around assistance options**

- **Incentivize timely payments using things offers like grocery gift cards, credit score boost, and other rewards programs**

- **Use regular signals to remind customers when payments are due, like text alerts**

Step 3: Missed payment

- Provide a tool online to personalize assistance options

- Use mobile customer service centers to connect with customers where they're at

- Create easy-to-find, simple messaging around options for one-time or first-time help

- Proactively reach out when a customer misses a payment

- Use a small, dedicated group to help customers find and navigate options

- Offer different types of help to meet different needs—temporary hardship versus chronic need

Go beyond the customer

- Have open dialogue with community agencies. Meet with them and discuss the assistance process.
- Analyze the assistance process and find where customers fail or fall out most often.
- Look at local nonprofits, state, and federal funding to supplement utility programs.

E Source market research on LMI customer journeys

E Source market research



We gather and analyze feedback from electric and gas utilities and thousands of their customers every year. Our insights help utilities better understand and interact with their customers.

Voice-of-the-customer (VOC)

Voice-of-the-utility (VOU)

Voice-of-the-employee (VOE)

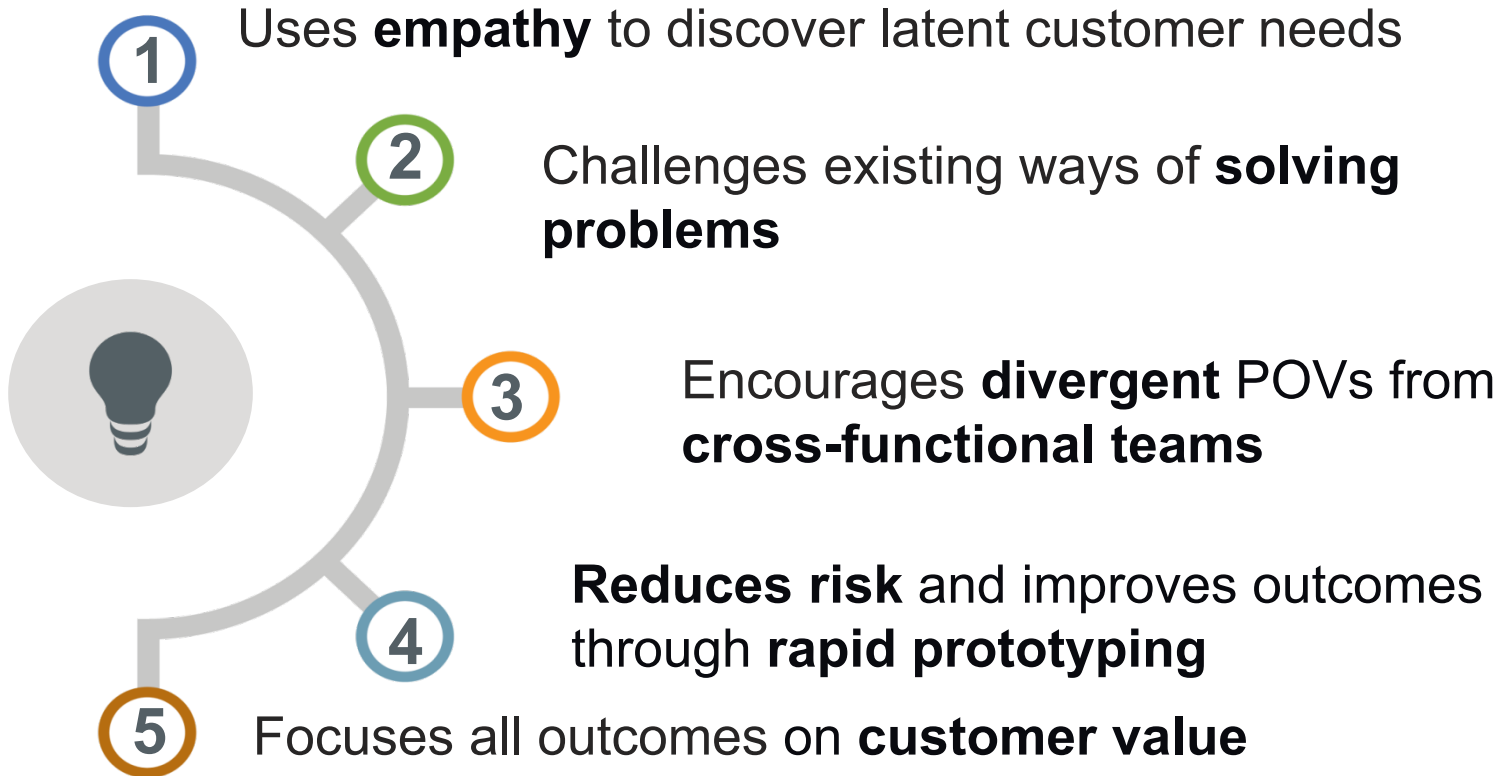
Quantitative

Qualitative

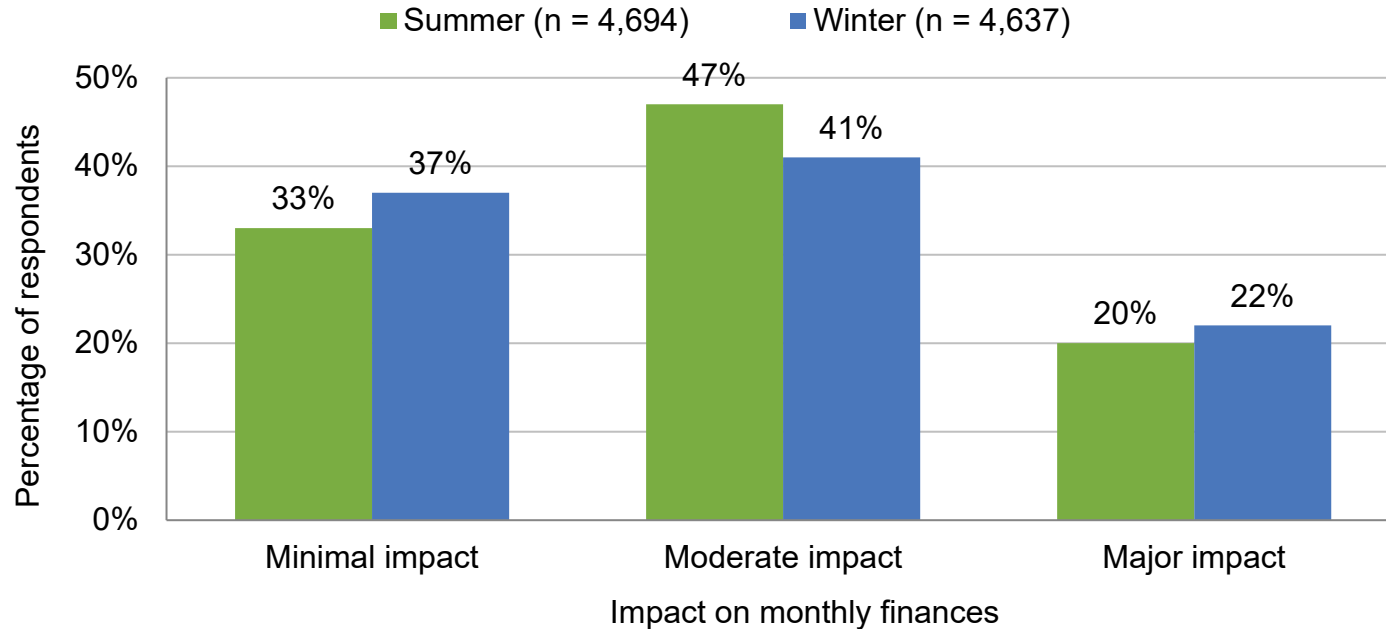
Ethnographic

User experience and journey-mapping

Human-centered design benefits



A majority say electric bill has moderate or major impact on monthly finances



Key insights

Those making less than \$50,000 annually are more likely than higher income customers to say their electric bill has a major impact on their monthly finances in winter and especially summer months.

Those struggling the most are hit hardest.

© E Source (2022 Residential Products, Programs, and Services survey). **Base:** All respondents, n varies season. **Question 3_2:** On average, how does your electricity bill affect your monthly finances, by season? **Notes:** Percentages shown in the chart reflects weighted data; sample sizes (n) are based on unweighted data. "Don't know" and "prefer not to say" responses (each <5%) removed.

Hearing directly from customers is a powerful thing.



Energy insecure: don't know what to expect



For many low-income customers, their energy bill is a consistent monthly **source of stress**. Many feel like their bills keep going up no matter what they do—leaving them feeling **shocked, guilty, and deflated**.

With limited funds to go around, they **want to be as prepared as possible** for monthly expenses. Sadly, the energy bill is often the hardest to plan for.

Reliability is very important



Key insights

Those making less than \$50,000 annually are more likely than higher income customers to give lower ratings for each of these utility attributes.

Rural customers are more likely than urban customers to give lower ratings for these utility attributes.

© E Source (2022 Residential Products, Programs, and Services). **Base:** All respondents (n = 4,854). **Question S2_2:** Please rate the following statements about how well your electric company performs in relation to the programs they offer, their service, and their communications. **Notes:** Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Percentages shown in the chart reflect weighted data; sample sizes (n) are based on unweighted data. We removed data labels less than 3%.

Energy insecure: Don't know what to do



Many low-income participants don't have the means to own their own home, leaving them **stuck renting** indefinitely. Because of this, they **don't feel in control** of their home efficiency.

Their living spaces tend to be **older and poorly insulated** and have **outdated technology**. Since they don't own, they're also **hesitant to invest money and time** to improve the situation.

Hearing directly from customers is a powerful thing.



LMI customer journeys throughout disconnection moratoriums

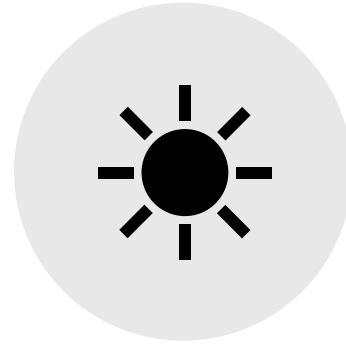
Project background

During last year's record-setting summer heat wave, SRP sustained its utility service disconnection moratorium policy for longer than ever before. According to the utility's policy, customers continued to generate bills (which were due according to its standard terms).

SRP provided broad payment arrangements for customers, but customers struggled to meet the inflationary challenges of paying off high summer bills. To prepare for similar (or even more extreme) heat events in the future, SRP hired E Source to review its moratorium policy and practices and determine if the utility needed to update its approach permanently.

For more information, check out our webinar, [Heat-related disconnection moratoriums: Critical review and policy recommendations](#).

Applying customer journey mapping in a weather-related disconnection moratorium



Pre-moratorium

- Preparation
- Communications

Moratorium

- Managing heat event
- Encouraging bill pay

Post-moratorium

- Managing debt
- Analysis and planning

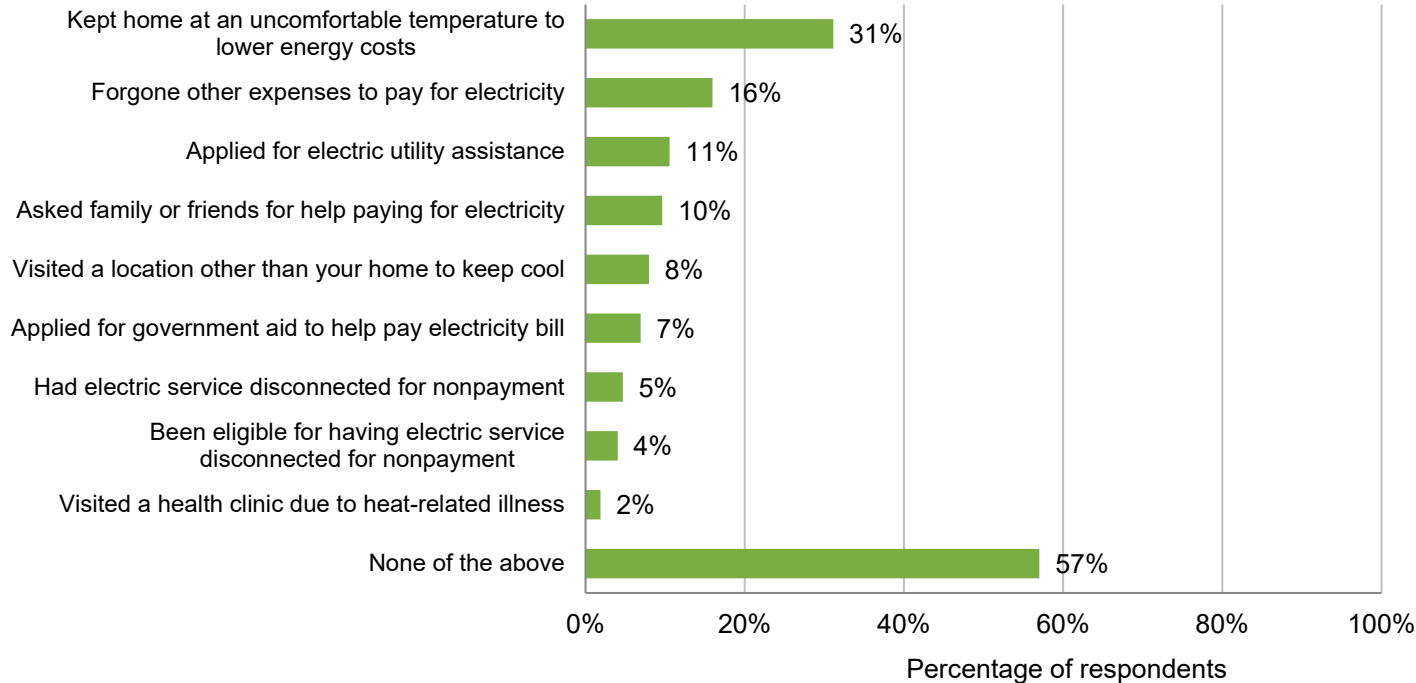
Customer survey overview

- Sample size: n = 1,459
- Margin of error of $\pm 2.6\%$ at 95% confidence level
- 10-minute online survey, incentivized
- Fielded January–February 2024
- English and Spanish surveys
- Customer target groups
 - Prepay, income-qualified discount plan
 - Prepay, no discount plan
 - Traditional postpay, discount plan
 - Traditional postpay, no discount plan
- Oversampling of prepay and discount plan customer groups
- Applied postfieldwork weighting to the results to better match the overall proportions of customer groups
- Customer experience with billing and payment
- Customer needs in terms of assistance and support
- Customer perceptions of current policy or approach
- Customer expectations
- Customer perceptions of potential adjustments to current policy or approach
- Customer preferences for receiving information from the utility
- Demographics and household characteristics or firmographics
- Appended additional datapoints provided by SRP

Health and financial experiences

Key insight

Income-qualified discount plan customers and those making less than \$50,000 per year were more likely to have experienced health- and financial-related issues in the past year than higher-income customers.



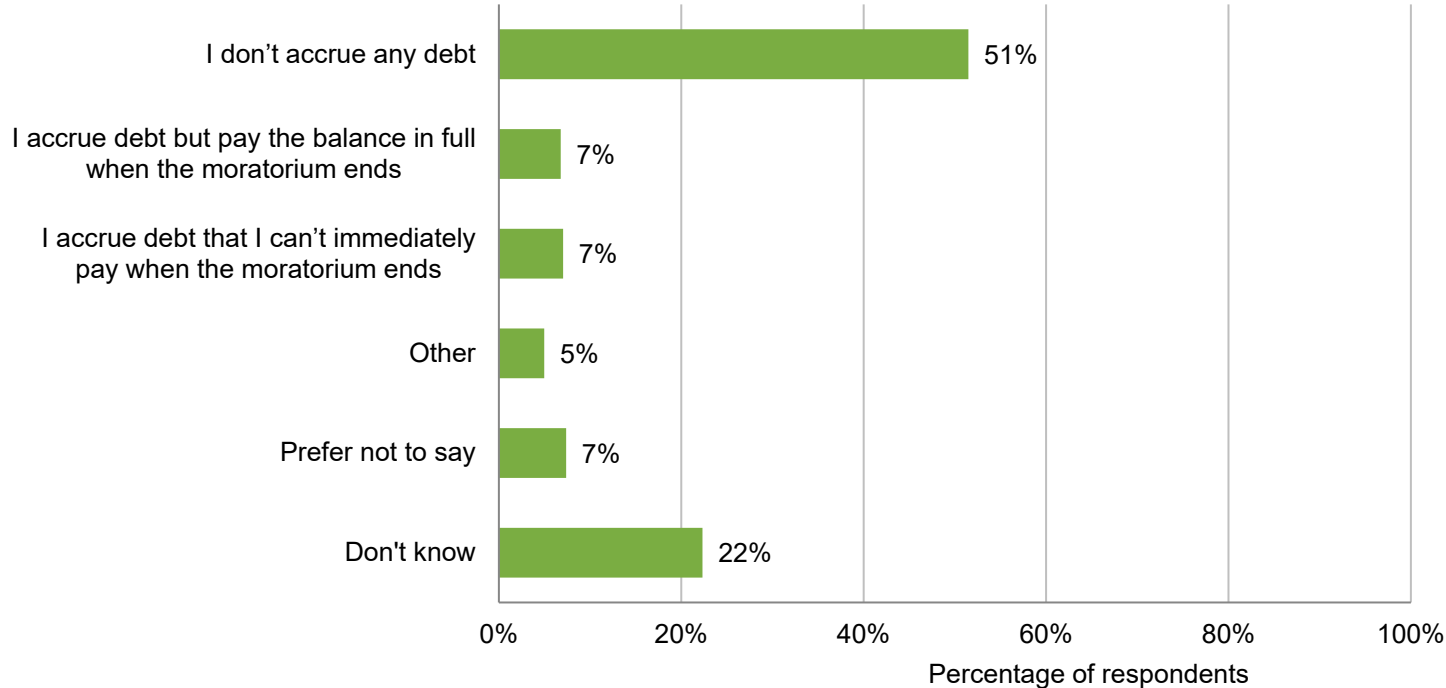
© E Source (SRP Moratorium Customer Experience Survey). **Base:** n = 1,459. **Question 5_8:** In the past 12 months, has your household experienced any of the following situations? Select all that apply.

Moratorium payment behaviors

💡 Key insight

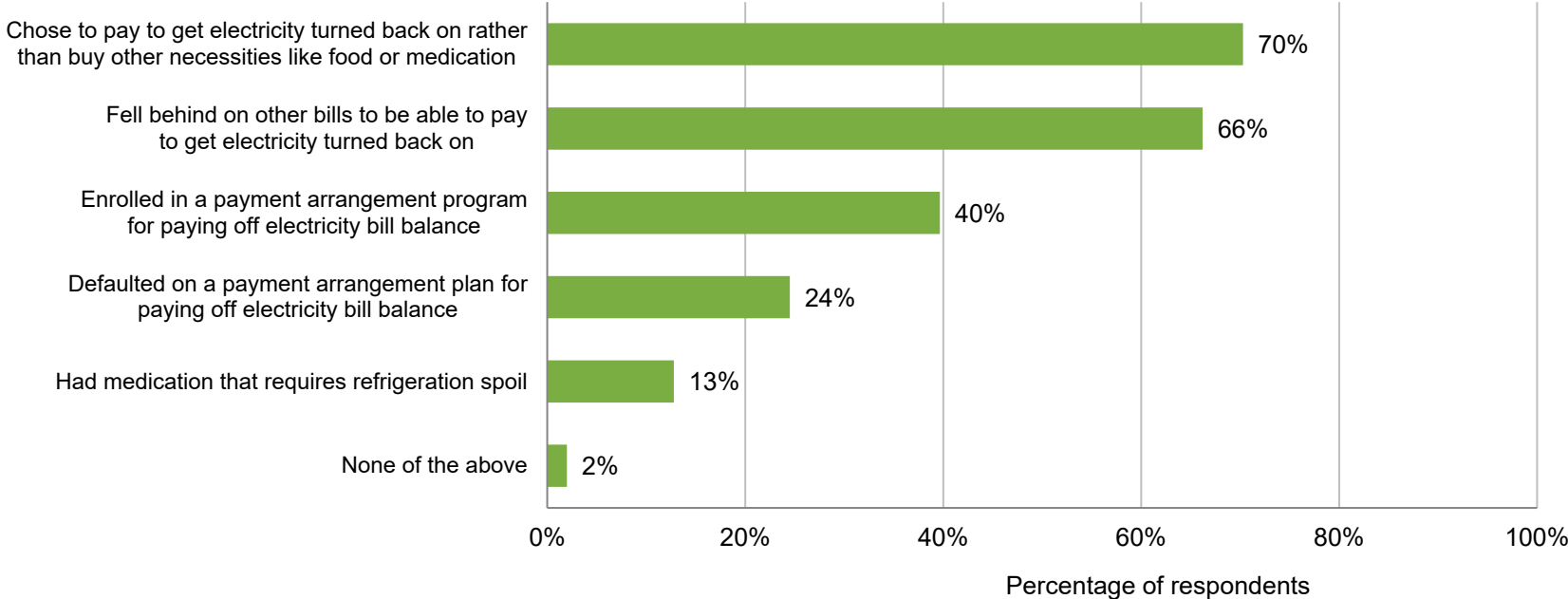
Characteristics of those who accrue debt during a moratorium:

- Low-income customers
- Those with more than three people in the household
- Those with children in the home
- Renters
- Those with a preference for communications in Spanish
- Those receiving assistance



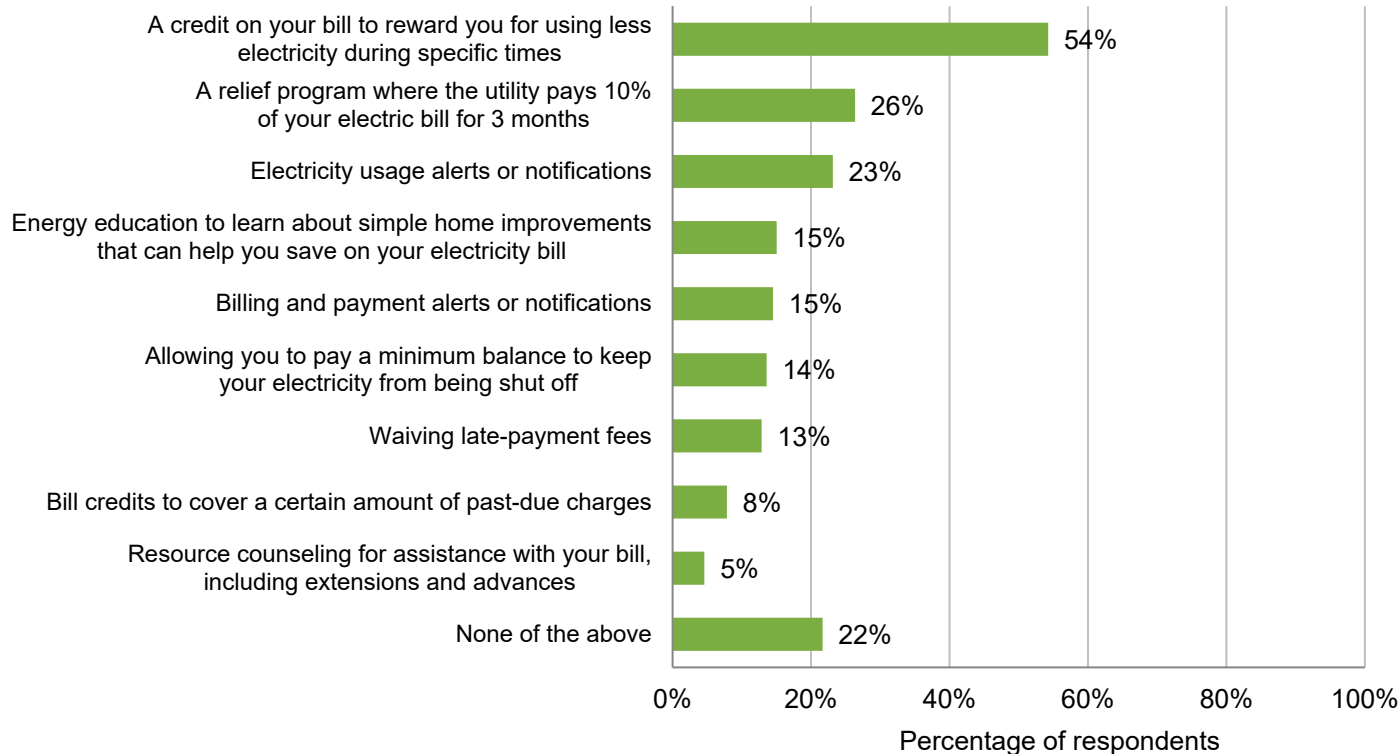
© E Source (SRP Moratorium Customer Experience Survey). **Base:** n = 1,459. **Question 5_5:** What best describes your typical payment action when in a weather-related disconnection moratorium?

Health and financial impacts of disconnection after weather-related moratorium



© E Source (SRP Moratorium Customer Experience Survey). **Base:** Customers who reported having electric service disconnected in the past 12 months for nonpayment after a weather-related moratorium ended (n = 45). **Question 5_10:** Which of the following, if any, did you experience after having electricity disconnected? Select all that apply. **Notes:** Use caution with small sample size.

Preferences for support



© E Source (SRP Moratorium Customer Experience Survey). **Base:** n = 1,459. **Question 4_2:** If SRP offered each of the following options, please select the ones you'd most likely use in the next 6 months. Select up to three.

Key insights

EPP customers and those making less than \$50,000 per year were much more likely than other customers to select, “A relief program where the utility pays 10% of your electric bill for 3 months.”

This option was the top choice or tied for first among those already on payment plans or receiving assistance.

The E Source LMI customer journey mapping multiclient study

2024 LMI customer journey mapping

We will be conducting LMI customer journey mapping to improve awareness and enrollments in energy assistance and other utility programs.

The research will be conducted from **Q3 2024 to early Q1 in 2025.**

1

Discovery

2

Customer

immersion

3

Action

Participation tiers

Full participation with Market Research

- Service territory-specific market research
- Industry-level market research
- Detailed customer journey maps
- Action planning workshop
- Final report
- Video and narrative

Scaled participation without Market Research

- No service territory-specific market research
- Industry-level market research
- Detailed customer journey maps
- Action planning workshop
- Final report
- Video and narrative

Questions?



Contact us



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