

2018 LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Award Project Evaluation

Project ID	GG-8
Title of Program	Harnett County Utilities Access Program
Program Category	
Submission Date	6/4/2018 5:37:28 PM
County	Harnett
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County Manager	Paula Stewart
Supervisor	Paula Stewart
Implementation Date	Oct. 4, 2016 (First applicant approved May 15, 2017)
FLSA Designation	Non-exempt
Project Team Members	Barry Blevins, General Services Director Anna Peele, Finance Technician Steve Ward, Public Utilities Director Paula Stewart, County Manager (was Deputy County Manager at the time of implementation)

Description of Productivity Improvement

The Harnett County Utilities Access Program has provided assistance to some of the County's low-income and very low-income to allow them access to clean drinking water from the Harnett County Department of Public Utilities by waiving the tap fee for qualifying home owners, which can make gaining water service cost-prohibitive for these residents. The Harnett County Utilities Access program represents a strategic partnership to provide enhanced service to residents in need between the Harnett County Board of Commissioners, Harnett County Manager's Office, Harnett County General Services (through its Community Development division), and the Harnett County Department of Public Utilities.

Description of why this project was initiated

One of Harnett County's greatest assets is its County-operated water and sewer utility. Harnett County Department of Public Utilities is a regional water and wastewater utility that provides water service to approximately 125,000 people in Harnett County and the surrounding Cape Fear region.

The Harnett County Regional Water Treatment Plant has a capacity of 42 million gallons per day and provides water to approximately 97 percent of the County's residents, along with residents of four of the county's five municipalities; Fort Bragg, Linden and Spring Lake in Cumberland County; Holly Springs and Fuquay-Varina in Wake County; and Johnston and Moore counties. While the utility has experienced tremendous success as the region has grown, the costs involved in tapping into the system has been a barrier to many low-income homeowners accessing clean drinking water, which is a necessity for a healthy life. In 2016, then Deputy County Manager Paula Stewart sought to change that by initiating the Harnett County Utilities Access Program. She had received numerous calls from residents whose wells had run dry or had become contaminated, and who were struggling to afford the fee to tap into the County water system even though water access was readily available to their property. She brought the issue up to the Harnett County Board of Commissioners who directed her to create a program that would address this issue. Stewart assigned the task of creating the program to General Services Director Barry Blevins who created the program under the Community Development division of his department and obtained a commitment to fund the program from Harnett County Public Utilities. The Harnett County Utilities Access Program assists low-income and very low-income owners of single-family homes in Harnett County in accessing water service by waiving the water tap fee for approved applicants. The program provides one-time assistance to eligible applicants who meet the criteria set forth in the Harnett County Utilities Access Policy. Eligible properties must be located in Harnett County and must be serviced by the Harnett County Department of Public Utilities. Eligibility requirements follow the income limits established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Community Development uses the same income limits to determine eligibility for other programs including urgent repairs and the Essential Single-Family Rehabilitation Loan program.

While approval does mean the County will waive the tap fee, successful applicants are required to complete connection to their home at their own cost, and must pay any required permitting fees, however the program does significantly reduce the costs involved in accessing County water. The program was implemented in Fall of 2016, and received its first inquiry from a citizen on October 4, 2016. The first application was approved on May 15, 2017. Since that time, a total of 12 applications have been approved with eight taps installed for residents who otherwise would likely not have been to access clean drinking water. As the program has progressed, more and more citizens have become aware.

Quantifiable results (sustainability, cost savings, cost avoidance and/or a higher level of service).

Indication of what resources were used and what was done with any accrued time savings

Since the program was implemented, dozens of residents have requested information about the program. To date, 18 homeowners have submitted applications with 12 of those applications being approved. Eight taps have been installed, resulting in a total of \$16,200 in waived tap fees (the tap fee is \$2,025). Four applications have been denied due either to the applicants not meeting the income requirements or living outside of the coverage area for County water service. Two applications are pending with further information required from the applicants. The revenue typically generated from tap fees goes toward the Harnett County Department of Public Utilities Enterprise Fund, which is in an excellent financial position, and does not come from the County's general fund. The program also provides a benefit to Public Utilities as it means additional residents are purchasing water from the County and paying for that water treatment each month.

Other descriptive information

As noted regarding the Implementation Date, while the program officially launched in Fall of 2016, the first applicant was approved on May 15, 2017. Of the 12 approved applications, 10 were approved in 2017 and two have been approved so far in 2018.