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Presentation Title: Increasing Program Participation In Underserved Groups: The Value of a Nuanced Understanding Of Demographics, Awareness, and Attitudes

Abstract: Low-income households and racial/ethnic minorities have less access than other households to the benefits of energy efficiency. This can mean not only disproportionately high energy bills but a less comfortable and even less healthy environment. Programs exist targeting low-income customers, but those customers still participate at lower rates than do others. Better understanding the barriers these groups face to program participation is an important element in addressing disparities. Energy Trust of Oregon has made diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) a high priority for several years. As part of that, Energy Trust has conducted a Customer Insights Study since 2016 to inform its efforts to increase participation overall and among less-served groups. This survey asks residential utility customers about household demographics, awareness of Energy Trust and its services, their home improvement history, and energy-related attitudes and behaviors. Previously, the study focused on participant-nonparticipant differences. In 2020, Energy Trust greatly expanded the scope and sample size of the study to allow a deeper investigation into how demographics relate to participation, awareness, attitudes, and behaviors. We surveyed 7,257 households, including an oversample of households in ethnically diverse and low-income areas. Lower income was associated with lower program participation, greater concern about ability to pay energy bills, and lower prioritization of environmentally friendly products or renewable energy, but income level was only modestly related to awareness of services. The relationship of race/ethnicity to program participation, awareness, attitudes, and behavior was complex but, in general, White and Asian American respondents differed from African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American ones. These differences largely mirrored the income differences regarding participation and attitudes but showed a more complex pattern relating to program awareness. These findings show that a nuanced understanding of how demographics relate to awareness and attitudes is needed to best support efforts to increase program participation.