

REPORT

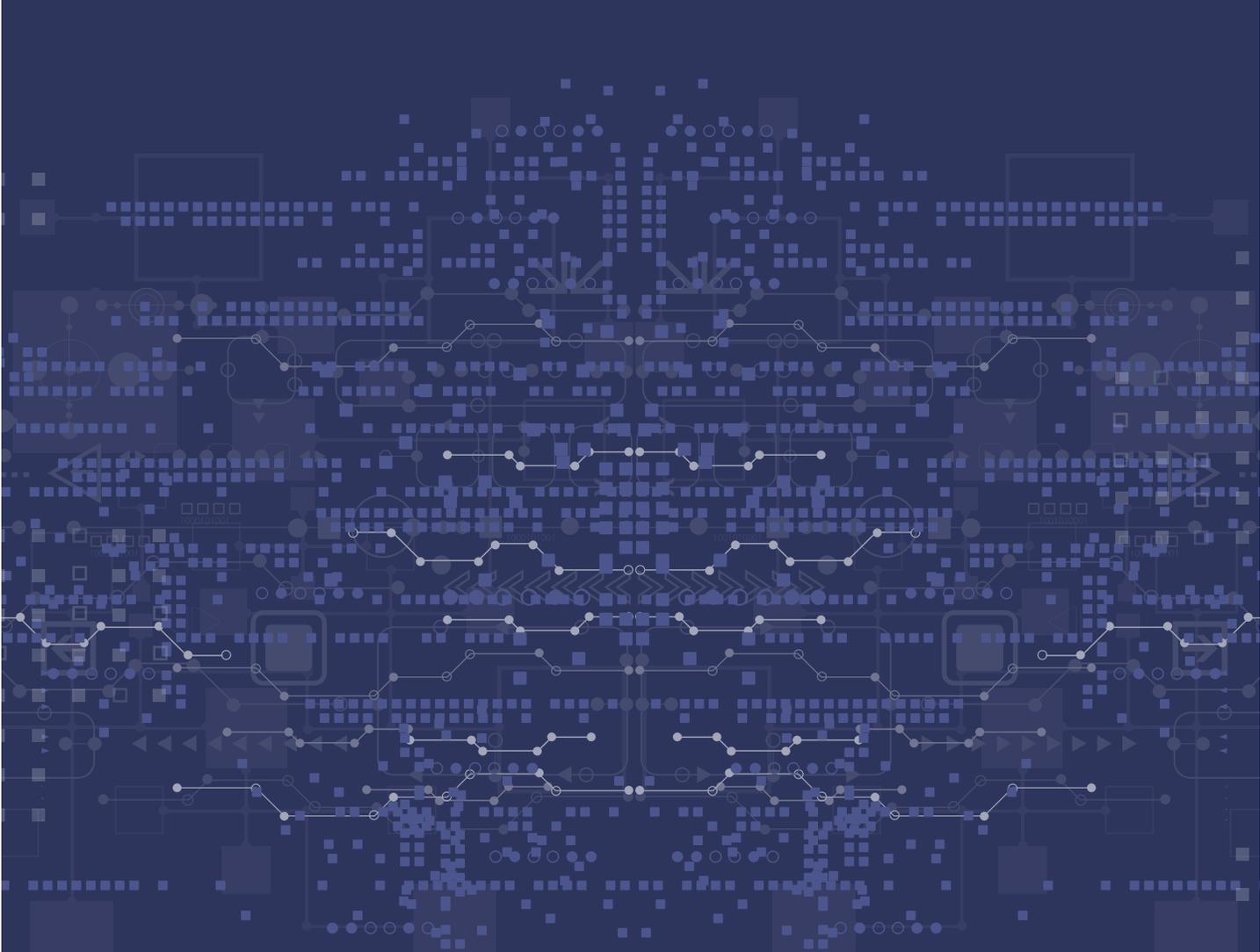
OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

# Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign



“The Office of People’s Counsel has been more than helpful. They really know the subject matter. I am still working on other issues, and probably will be as long as they keep escalating the rates. But I am delighted that the Office of People’s Counsel is there. They really do a fabulous job.”

- **BETTIE FLORENCE**, senior resident of Ward 4 in Northwest Washington





## Message from the People's Counsel:

I am pleased to present this Report on the Office of the People's Counsel's Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign, in accordance with DC Council Bill 21-158, the Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Support Act of 2015, proposed by At-Large Councilmember Anita Bonds. OPC appreciates the Council's confidence in our ability to deliver and implement a tangible benefit to our shared constituents.

Over its 40 years of existence, the Office of the People's Counsel has aggressively served ratepayers and represented their interests in utility matters in accordance with its mission to advocate, educate and protect District of Columbia consumers of natural gas, electric and telephone services. Our constituents include a broad range of DC consumers in all eight wards of the city. The Office pays particular attention to our underserved constituents including the special needs of low-income consumers and seniors. Over the past four years, we have significantly expanded our outreach to seniors. An on-going challenge we face is that not everyone who needs assistance is aware of the critical aid and resources OPC can provide.

This Council mandate has enabled the OPC to enhance our existing operations and develop a forward-looking strategic approach to facilitate our ability to more effectively serve DC senior communities in terms of outreach and education on utility service issues impacting the quality of life, including viable and affordable energy efficiency measures.

OPC has utilized a phased approach in implementing its senior outreach and education campaign. First, OPC convened a Low- and Limited-Income Seniors Focus Group, comprised of a diverse group of senior residents, community leaders and organizational stakeholders, to ascertain the primary issues and concerns of DC seniors regarding utility services and the optimal methods to conduct these outreach and education initiatives.

Armed with the information gathered from this Focus Group, OPC then launched an Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign, utilizing a consultant to provide targeted outreach and education to low-income, elderly consumers, informing them of: 1) the benefits and options for energy efficiency programs and practices; 2) OPC's services that can assist ratepayers with any issues or disputes they may have with their utility service providers; and 3) implemented an awareness campaign that utilized newspaper, radio and transit media.

This report details how these initiatives were implemented, what the outcomes were from the initiatives, and what recommendations OPC offers as a result. This Report is part of OPC's long-term strategic plan designed to better service our diverse constituency.

I believe that OPC's Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign will continue to enhance OPC's advocacy, education and protection of the residents of the District of Columbia in all eight wards of our great city, particularly underserved communities and seniors in need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sandra Mattavous-Frye".

Sandra Mattavous-Frye  
People's Counsel



## Low- and Limited-Income Seniors

### FOCUS GROUP

On February 22, 2016, OPC convened a Low- and Limited-Income Seniors Focus Group to ascertain the best methods to educate seniors on energy efficient practices and programs.

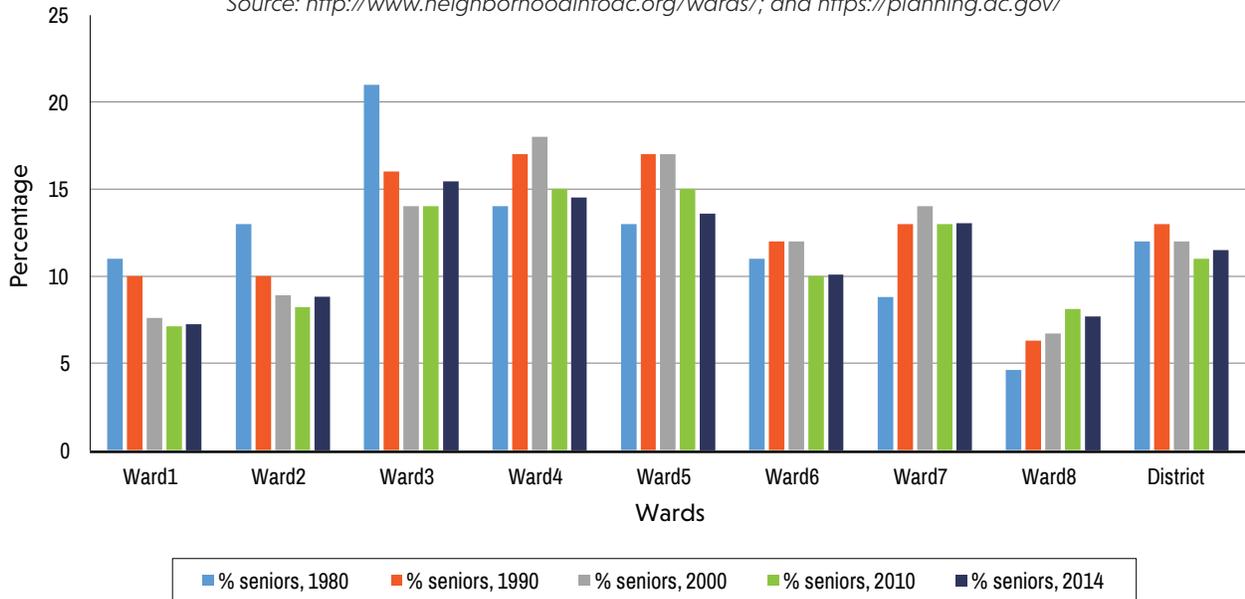
The Focus Group participants included a diverse group of seniors; Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners; representatives from government and independent agencies; and community and nonprofit organizations that provide services to low- and limited-income seniors. Participants responded to questions, which generated discussions that culminated with voting to determine rankings for problems and suggested resolutions.

The Focus Group comprised 17 participants, including 12 seniors, four representatives of government and nonprofit agencies, and one ANC representative.

The information in the following pages came out of the discussion at the Focus Group.

## Trends in Percentage of Seniors by Ward

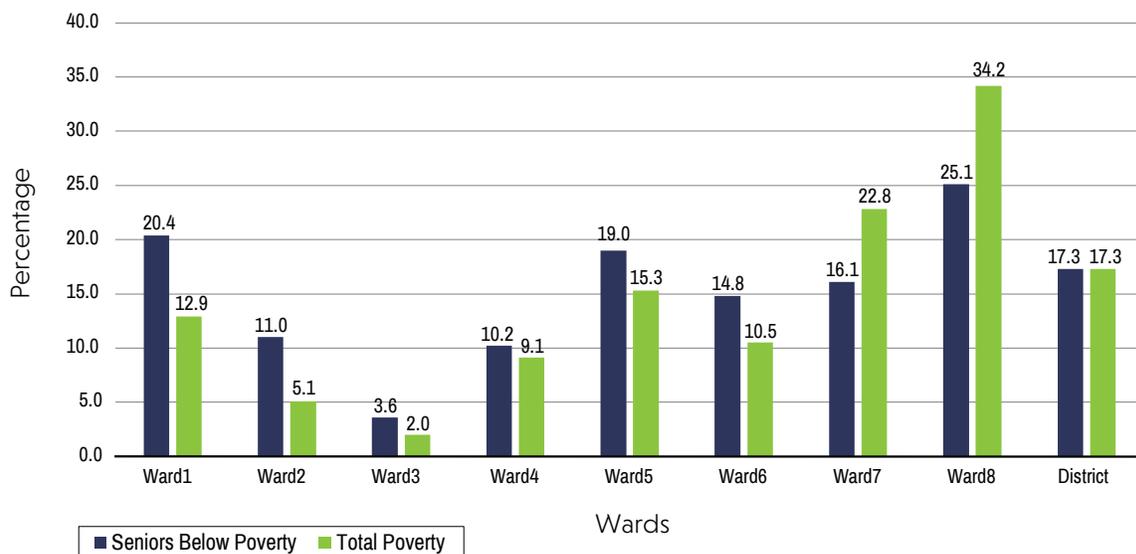
Source: <http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org/wards/>; and <https://planning.dc.gov/>



**Note:** Figure 1 shows that the percentage of seniors has either remained unchanged or increased in 2014 compared with 1980 in Wards 4 and 5, but declined in Wards 1, 2, 3, and 6. However, the percentage of seniors has increased or slightly declined in Wards 7 and 8. This observation may imply that seniors from other Wards are moving into relatively low-income Wards (Wards 7 and 8).

## Percentage of Seniors Below Poverty and Total Poverty By Ward

Source: <https://planning.dc.gov/>



**Note:** Figure 2 shows that there are more seniors below poverty than the total population below poverty for the Ward in Wards 1,2,3,4,5, and 6. However, the percentage of seniors below poverty is less than total poverty for the Ward in Wards 7 and 8. It appears that seniors living in relatively well-to-do Wards are experiencing the greatest poverty than those living in relatively lower-income Wards such as Wards 7 and 8.

## OUTCOME A:

### What are the types of senior housing and living arrangements?

Housing situations for low- and limited-income seniors included those living in senior dwellings, apartments, condominiums, cooperatives, in their own home, or with family. Based on the discussions, it appeared that seniors' average annual income is \$9,600.

## OUTCOME B:

### What were the problems low- and limited-income seniors have with utility companies?

*In addition to the cost of utility services, the major problems low- and limited-income seniors have with utility companies included (in descending order of priority):*

1. Lack of ratepayer advocacy and legal representation
2. Lack of participation in the process of setting of utility costs and rates; current D.C. laws do not require community members to participate in the process
3. Lack of understanding of monthly fees and surcharges – what they are for, why they are on the bill and how they are determined
4. Being informed about how to read and understand monthly utility bills
5. Poor or lacking communications from utility companies, including language barriers and small print;
6. Consistently poor customer service experiences
7. Poor utilization of media in communicating information to consumers
8. Lack of discounts for low- and limited-income seniors
9. Required deposit for service restoration or reconnection
10. Termination of utility service to low- and limited-income seniors
11. Being charged for estimated monthly bills instead of actual billing when meter is accessible
12. Accessing weatherization programs
13. Slamming (offered a lower rate but receiving a variable service rate)
14. Not being provided a written contract for services after speaking with a customer service representative
15. In the District, there are utility fees and surcharges that are not charged in other jurisdictions
16. Lack of information about how the surcharge and fee structure is established
17. Utility companies hold new renters or owners responsible for previous renter's or owner's unpaid utility bills
18. Lack of process to identify and help low- and limited-income seniors who need financial assistance to pay their utility bills
19. The need for utility customers to receive a quality control/quality assurance report from utility companies.

## OUTCOME C:

### What were the recommendations provided as possible solutions to the problems?

*Focus Group made the following recommendations to utility companies:*

1. Provide advocacy services for the disabled and legal representation when a consumer has to attend a hearing
2. Provide advocacy services to low- and limited-income seniors on topics such as mergers and the pros and cons of new products
3. Limit the amount of materials distributed. Information should be condensed and concise; Outreach methods should include methods that reach seniors with low-literacy capabilities
4. Customer service representatives should be trained to provide accurate and thorough information. Customer service representatives should consistently provide information that would benefit seniors without them having to request that information. All changes to an account should be followed by written verification to seniors
5. There should be discounts for low- and limited-income seniors, especially those who have been living in their homes for 20 years or more. There should be a flat rate for utility services to seniors
6. Develop an affordable payment plan for seniors who have past due utility bills, which would avert service disconnection and reconnection fees
7. Enable consumers to participate in the process of setting rates prior to them being set
8. Pertinent D.C. utility laws should be changed to require that consumers participate in the rate-setting process
9. Through collaborations with community, nonprofit and independent organizations and government agencies, a system should be developed to identify vulnerable low- and limited-income seniors, including those with disabilities, who may need access to financial programs to assist them in managing their utility bills before they miss payments and face utility service disconnection
10. Utility customers should receive a report on quality control, including which agency has oversight and the frequency of monitoring. The report should be accessible to seniors throughout the year.



“I had been trying for months to switch my telephone service from Verizon to Comcast, because I had become unhappy with the service that Verizon was providing - even though I had been a customer of Verizon and Ma Bell for decades. Verizon was taking months to respond, and nothing was getting done. So I went to the Office of People’s Counsel and presented the facts of my situation. They got back to me in a week or two and said that everything would be straightened out in 24 hours. Indeed, 24 hours later my phone service was switched to Comcast. Everything, including my email is now resolved, thanks to the Office of People’s Counsel.

“If you have a problem with the service that utilities are supposed to be providing you, take your issue to the Office of People’s Counsel. They will straighten things out.”

**HAROLD FISHER**

79-year-old resident of Ward 5  
in Northeast Washington

## OUTCOME D:

### Recommendations for utility companies' customer service departments to improve service delivery to low- and limited-income seniors

*Members of the Focus Group found that utility companies' customer service departments rated poorly as seniors experienced long wait periods, language barriers and frustration with automated telephone prompts. They gave the following suggestions:*

1. Thoroughly trained representatives should provide service discount information and the most affordable service plan without being asked
2. There should be a wait time of three minutes or less when calling the utility company
3. An actual customer service representative should assist seniors, instead of an automated voice with prompts
4. There should be culturally sensitive representatives to address the needs of non-English speaking clients
5. When requested, a supervisor should be available to respond to customer's questions
6. There should be longer customer service hours to meet the needs of seniors that work
7. Utility companies should have business offices located in each quadrant of the city for easy customer access
8. A "Regulation Council" should be developed to monitor forms of discrimination based on age, race, zip code or disability.

## OUTCOME E:

### What are the types of energy efficient products that low- and limited-income seniors use?

*Focus Group participants agreed that seniors are interested in energy efficient practices and products, but they find the products not easily accessible or affordable.*

Seniors primarily use:

1. Power surge protectant outlets
2. Energy Star Appliances
3. LED Light Bulbs.



*Two recommendations were provided by the participants to help low- and limited-income seniors become informed about the benefits of energy efficient products and where to purchase the products:*

1. Frequent television and radio commercials
2. Monthly community education sessions.

## OUTCOME F:

# Recommendations for utility companies' customer service departments to improve service delivery to low- and limited-income seniors

*The recommended methods of communicating information about utility programs, products and services were varied:*

1. For ease of reading, all written material should be in large print with a minimum 14-point font size
2. Communications should utilize the following media:
  - a. Newspapers (near the obituary section)
  - b. Community newspapers (i.e., Northwest Current, Beacon and The Informer)
  - c. U.S. Postal Service
  - d. Community List Serves
  - e. Email and social media, including Facebook and Twitter
  - f. Government and community organizations' Websites
3. There should be neighborhood programs (one per month) and outreach programs should be on display or discussed at community events
4. Information should be distributed through schools as a means to reach the parents and caregivers
5. Relationships with churches, ANC's, health clinics, and doctor's offices where information could be posted or mailers and information packets distributed
6. District of Columbia 311 operators must listen thoroughly to the senior citizen on the phone before transferring to a particular agency. (Current response is that when the operator hears the caller is a senior, they immediately transferred to the D.C. Office on Aging)
7. Repetitive television /radio advertisements and PSA's during the time when seniors are watching or listening
8. Collaborative efforts between community organizations, government agencies, churches and health clinics to develop annual community events and conduct senior education and outreach.



## OUTCOME G:

### Recommended services to be provided by an effective and efficient utility services program that addresses the needs of low- and limited-income seniors.

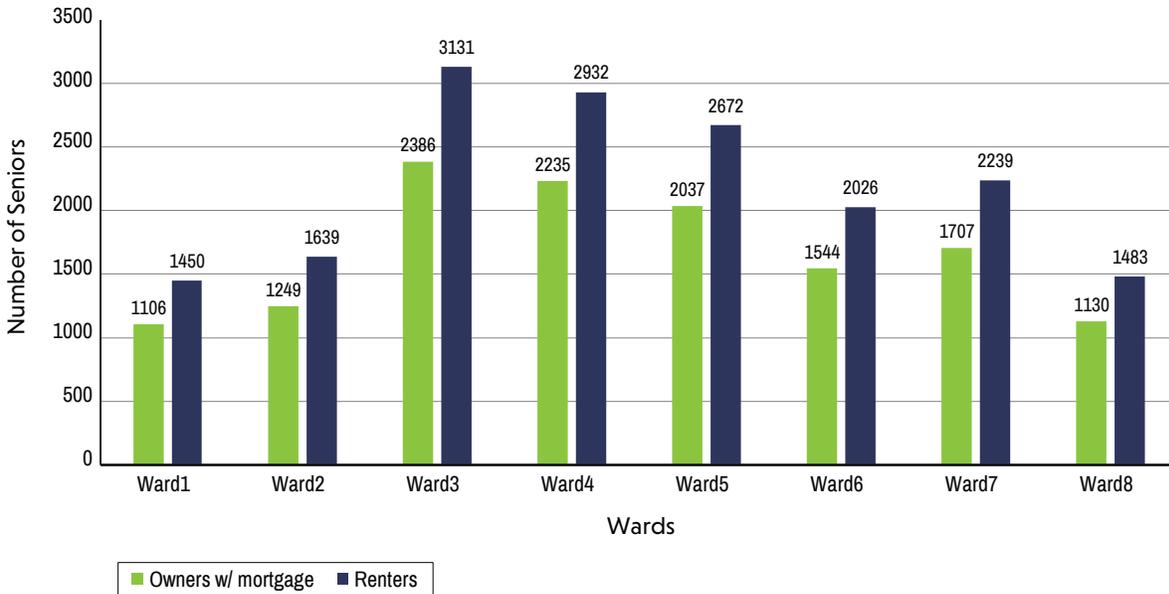


*The following utility program proposal includes services, programs and outreach to assist low- and limited-income seniors in navigating the processes and programs focused on financial assistance and consumer education:*

1. Affordable utility payment plans
2. Designated senior liaisons to provide quality and thorough customer service
3. Development of an annual Senior Identification Program conducted via large print mailers and various outreach methods. Utility companies would then be able to easily recognize the “senior” status. If a senior falls behind on a utility bill or is in jeopardy of service disconnection, the utility company should provide information on financial assistance, payment plans and other options
4. Implement programs that offer financial incentives to switch to energy efficient saving products (i.e., LED lightbulbs, Energy Star appliances and solar panels)
5. Securing a grant that would be awarded to an independent agency to financially-assist seniors in jeopardy of having their utilities disconnected and to fund legal services and advocacy for low- and limited-income seniors who have complaints and scheduled hearings with utility companies
6. Develop home energy audits and energy efficiency programs to include private homes, senior dwellings and low-income residential buildings. (District of Columbia Department of Housing staff should participate, as well as building and property managers)
7. Financial assistance programs should have guidelines based on the senior’s personal or household income. Extended affordable payment plans should be developed for seniors. A limit should be determined for frequency of program use
8. Legislation should be enacted that would prevent disconnection of seniors’ utility services. In addition, guidelines should be adjusted to ensure that the utility bill does not have to be paid in full prior to the utility being reconnected
9. Low- and limited-income seniors on government assistance programs should be exempt from utility service disconnection
10. Utility service discounts should be developed specifically for low/limited seniors.

## Estimated Number of Seniors Who Spent at Least 30% of their Income on Housing Costs

*Sources of Data: <https://planning.dc.gov>; State Housing Profiles- Housing conditions and affordability for the Older Population by Rodney Harrell, Ph.D., and ARI Houser, AARP Public Policy Institute, 2011*



**Note:** The AARP study (see citation above) indicated that among seniors (65 years of age and above), 37.5% own their house with mortgage while 50% are renters. Regardless of the nature of home ownership, the AARP study found out that about 50% of seniors who own and 50% of seniors who rent their residential units spend at least 30% of their household income for housing costs. It is assumed that utility costs account for about 15% of household income. In general, when housing and utility costs combined account for 30% of household income, those costs are considered to be very high. In the District, it appears that at least 20% and 25% of seniors who own or rent experience significant financial burden, respectively.

# Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign

*Given the outcomes from the Focus Group, OPC launched an Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education Campaign.*

OPC issued an RFP for an outreach consultant to provide targeted outreach and education to low- and limited-income senior utility customers. The outreach and education provided information about OPC's services and the benefits and options for energy-efficient programs and practices.

The outreach consultant was tasked with: 1) the direct dissemination of educational publications on energy efficiency, renewable energy and low-income energy assistance programs available in the District to individuals in their homes; and 2) the direct dissemination of OPC literature to individuals in their homes in order to increase their awareness of the services and assistance OPC provides in addressing individual issues and disputes with utilities.

CNXIS, a District of Columbia-based firm, was retained as the outreach consultant, and conducted a door-to-door campaign September 5 – October 31, 2016. During the campaign CNXIS disseminated information to 8,358 low-income and senior households in Wards 5, 7 and 8. Nearly 30 percent of the targeted households answered the door during work hours on weekdays, which indicates that the people who answered were likely on fixed incomes without consistent work schedules. CNXIS also participated in a Block Party/Health Expo at Langston Dwellings where consultant representatives spoke with 186 residents. Of the 186, 143 were unaware of OPC's mission. In all of its door-to-door and event outreach activities, CNXIS reported that it did not encounter one resident who did not respond favorably to the message they were delivering.

During the September/October time frame, OPC also placed educational and informational materials in several print, radio and transit media outlets, including The Washington Informer, Capital & Community News, Current Newspapers, Senior Beacon Magazine, WMMJ Radio, WPRS Radio, Metrobus (500 buses) and Metrorail (125 trains). It is estimated that this awareness effort generated 109,000 views on newspapers ads, 3.3 million on the bus and train ads, and 1,020,600 listeners on the radio stations.

## OPC'S AWARENESS EFFORTS



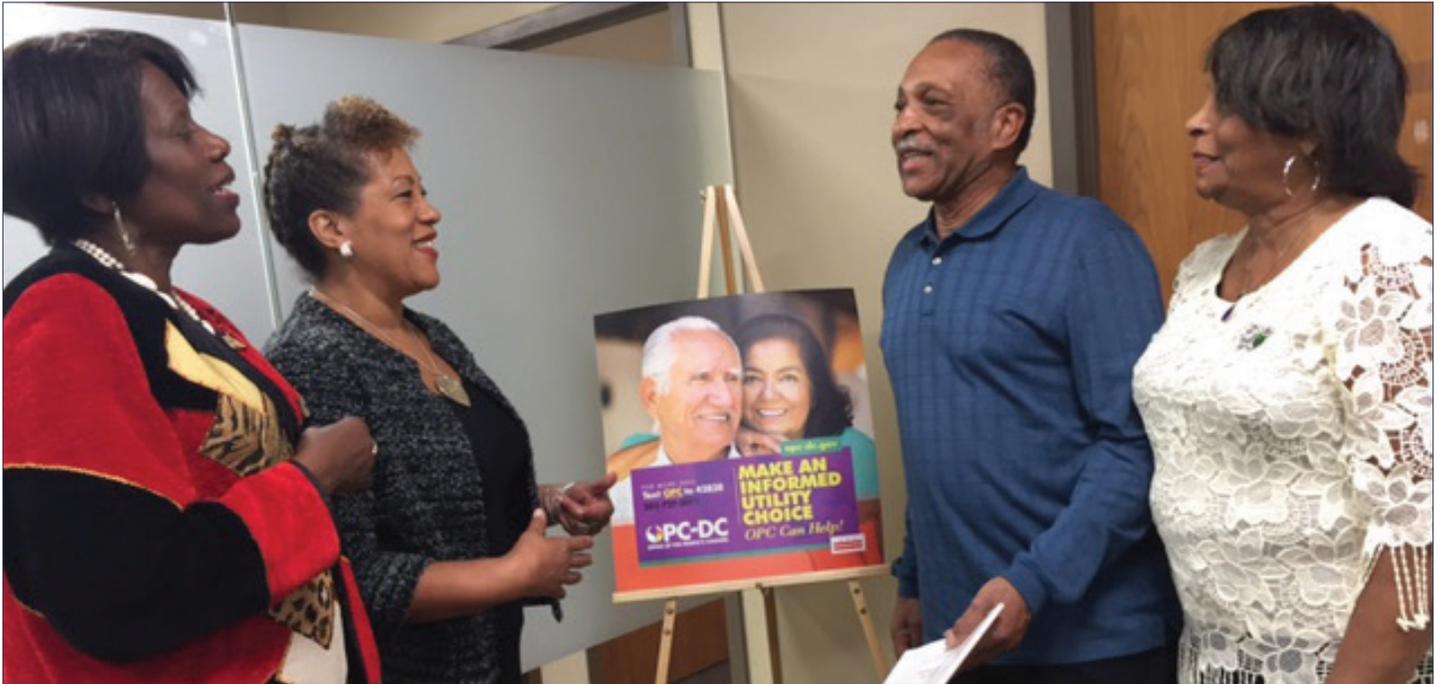
**109K**  
Newspapers Ads  
Views



**3,300K**  
Bus and Train Ads  
Views



**1,020K**  
Radio Stations  
Listeners



## OPC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOING FORWARD

*Following the Focus Group and Outreach Campaign, OPC conducted an assessment of the outcomes of the activities and developed four recommendations for future initiatives:*

1. A commission, including OPC, Public Service Commission, the D.C. Attorney General's Office and AARP's Legal Counsel for the Elderly should be created with the mission to educate and protect senior residents from third party energy suppliers
2. Quarterly meetings should be convened with agencies and other stakeholders who serve senior communities for the purpose of creating better and more comprehensive services that protect senior citizens
3. Annual meetings should be convened with senior focus group(s) in order to remain informed of current issues, concerns and experiences of senior utility consumers; and
4. There should be amendments to the D.C. Consumer Bill of Rights (CBOR), which are aimed at strengthening consumer protections for senior citizens.

“Our utility bills got out of hand. My husband and I had some serious illnesses, and it became too much to keep up with the bills. One of my worst experiences was with Pepco. I contacted the Office of People’s Counsel and my Councilmember, and we were able to get some assistance.

We also expressed our concerns about the lack of community involvement in rate setting, as well as the lack of trust or respect for seniors, especially those on a fixed income. With the help of People’s Counsel, we are demanding and getting more respect.”

– **BETTIE FLORENCE**, senior resident of Ward 4 in Northwest Washington



1133 15th Street N.W., Suite 500,  
Washington, DC 20005

Phone: (202) 727-3071

Fax: (202) 727-1014

TTY-TTD: (202) 727-2876

Email: [info@opc-dc.gov](mailto:info@opc-dc.gov)

[www.opc-dc.gov](http://www.opc-dc.gov)