



Retired Public Employees Council Chapter 39 – Asotin & Garfield Counties Area

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Please Note: The RPEC statewide Executive Board strongly recommends against holding in-person meetings at this time. Members should consider carefully and attend meetings in-person at their own risk. Regardless of vaccination status, people should still take steps to protect themselves and others while in public settings. This includes wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet from others, and avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces.

Post COVID Vaccine Guidance

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) adopted the guidance released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding post-vaccine behavior. If someone has been fully vaccinated, they can:

- Gather indoors with fully vaccinated people in private residences without wearing a mask and,
- Gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household in private residences (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

If a vaccinated person has been around someone with COVID-19, they do not need to stay away from others or get tested unless they have symptoms. However, if a vaccinated person lives in a group setting and is around someone who has COVID-19, they should still stay away from others for 14 days and get tested, even if without symptoms.

Regardless of vaccination status, people should still take steps to protect themselves and others while in public settings. This includes wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet from others, and avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces.

\$40 Million in Assistance Funds Available for Utility Customers

The WA State Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) recently approved \$40 million in new energy bill assistance funding for customers struggling financially due to the pandemic. Low-income energy and natural gas customers of four of the state's investor-owned utilities Avista, Cascade Natural Gas, PacifiCorp, and Puget Sound Energy are eligible for bill assistance as part of UTC-mandated efforts to assist customers impacted by COVID-19.

Customers are eligible for these funds if they earn no more than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and individual customers can receive up to \$2,500 per year in additional bill assistance.

The customer assistance funds are available in addition to any federal Low Income Home

Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) grants or existing bill assistance programs, and long-term payment plan options. Customers who received energy assistance in the past may automatically receive a grant to forgive past balances due, up to the \$2,500 annual limit. Eligible customers who have not received energy assistance should reach out directly to their utilities for instructions on how to apply.

The programs approved include:

- Avista's \$6.5 million Debt Relief Program
- Cascade Natural Gas' \$2.5 million Big HEARTS Program
- PacifiCorp's \$3.1 million Residential COVID-19 Bill Payment Assistance Program
- Puget Sound Energy's \$27.7 million Crisis Affected Customer Assistance Program

UTC-regulated electric and natural gas utilities are currently waiving late fees and cannot disconnect customers for nonpayment through July 31.

Fraud Alert: COVID-19 Scams

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General is alerting the public about fraud schemes related to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Scammers are using telemarketing calls, text messages, social media platforms, and door-to-door visits to perpetrate COVID-19-related scams. Fraudsters are offering COVID-19 tests, HHS grants, and Medicare prescription cards in exchange for personal details, including Medicare information. However, these services are unapproved and illegitimate.

These scammers use the coronavirus pandemic to benefit themselves, and beneficiaries face potential harm. The personal information collected can be used to fraudulently bill federal health care programs and commit medical identity theft.

Protect Yourself:

- Be cautious of COVID-19 survey scams. Do not give your personal, medical, or financial information to anyone claiming to offer money or gifts in exchange for your participation in a COVID-19 vaccine survey.
- Be mindful of how you dispose of COVID-19 materials such as syringes, vials, vial container boxes, vaccination record cards, and shipment or tracking records. Improper disposal of these items could be used by bad actors to commit fraud.
- Offers to purchase COVID-19 vaccination cards are scams. Valid proof of COVID-19 vaccination can only be provided to individuals by legitimate providers administering vaccines.
- Photos of COVID-19 vaccination cards should not be shared on social media.
- Posting content that includes your date of birth, health care details or other personally identifiable information can be used to steal your identity.
- Be vigilant and protect yourself from potential fraud concerning COVID-19 vaccines. You will not be asked for money to enhance your ranking for vaccine eligibility. Government and state officials will not call you to obtain personal information to receive the vaccine.
- Beneficiaries should be cautious of unsolicited requests for their personal, medical,

and financial information. Medicare will not call beneficiaries to offer COVID-19 related products, services, or benefit review.

- Be suspicious of any unexpected calls or visitors offering COVID-19 tests or supplies. If you receive a suspicious call, hang up immediately.
- Do not respond to, or open hyperlinks in, text messages about COVID-19 from unknown individuals.
- Ignore offers or advertisements for COVID-19 testing or treatments on social media sites. If you make an appointment for a COVID-19 test online, make sure the location is an official testing site.
- Do not give your personal or financial information to anyone claiming to offer HHS grants related to COVID-19.
- Be aware of scammers pretending to be COVID-19 contact tracers. Legitimate contact tracers will never ask for your Medicare number, financial information, or attempt to set up a COVID-19 test for you and collect payment information for the test.

If you suspect COVID-19 health care fraud, call 800-HHS-TIPS (800-447-8477).

New Biden Infrastructure Plan Would Boost Homecare, Upgrade VA Hospitals

“Even before COVID-19, our country was in the midst of a caregiving crisis,” the plan says. “Hundreds of thousands of people who need better care are unable to access it, even though they qualify under Medicaid.” The package would:

- Spend \$400 billion to expand access to quality, affordable home or community-based care.
- Extend the Money Follows the Person program that helps people in nursing homes and other institutions transition back to living at home or in the community. “AARP has long fought for more options and greater access to services to help older adults live in their homes and communities,” said Rhonda Richards, AARP senior legislative representative for health and family.
- Reduce the waitlist for people who need home- and community-based care by expanding access. Medicaid does not cover home and community-based services the way it covers nursing home care, so there are more limited options for most older adults who want to live in their homes and communities. The level of investment in care available at home and in the community varies by state, and there may be waiting lists for that care.
- Improve the wages and quality of life for essential home care workers.

While the median age of U.S. private sector hospitals is roughly 11 years, the Veterans Affairs' hospital portfolio has a median age of 58. The President believes our veterans deserve state-of-the-art hospitals and care. President Biden's plan provides \$18 billion for the modernization of Veterans Affairs hospitals and clinics.

You can access the **White House Fact Sheet the American Jobs Plan** at:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>

RPEC Executive Director's Report

State Legislative Update: The House and Senate released their proposed 2021-2023 budgets in late March. **In a surprise move, the House included a provision for a one-time 1.5% increase for PERS/TRS Plan 1 Retirees (capped at \$22 per month) which would take effect in July.** We expect the House to approve that budget provision and will encourage budget leaders in both chambers to include it in the final budget which will be negotiated later this month prior to the April 25th end of session date.

RPEC was pleased to see that both budget proposals preserved the PEBB Medicare Benefit, fully funded the employer contributions to the pension systems, and enact a progressive tax on high-end capital gains. This is due in part to the advocacy of retirees like you, so thank you for reaching out to your legislators. It has made a difference.

As retirees, RPEC members have an important role in the discussion around the tax code and it is important that your Legislators continue to hear from you. A full list of the bills we are tracking, and their status can be found on the RPEC website at: www.rpecwa.org.

We encourage our members to join our weekly Legislative Update Zoom Meeting every Friday at 1:00 PM. To join us via computer or tablet visit: www.zoom.us/join and enter the Meeting ID: 828 6634 6713, then enter the Passcode: 205507. You can also dial in by telephone at 1-253-215-8782 and enter the same Meeting ID and Passcode.

Save the Date for Upcoming Trainings:

May 24th, 10am-11am Chapter Treasurer's Training via Zoom
June 14th, 10am-12pm-Leadership Training via Zoom

Registration and additional information will follow. All members are encouraged to attend the Leadership Training even if they are not chapter officers.

Member Only Benefits:

We have added a new section to the RPEC website with information on resources available to our members. Please visit the link below for details on the many discounts available to retirees and their family members, such as hearing and dental services, the AFSCME Free College benefit, and the

Foundation for Working Families relief program for members in need.

<https://rpecwa.org/member-only-benefits/>

Important Dates – RPEC Statewide Events

April 22, 2021	RPEC Legislative Committee Meeting
April 26, 2021	RPEC Finance Committee Meeting
April 27, 2021	RPEC Membership Committee
May 6, 2021	RPEC Executive Board Meeting
May 24, 2021	RPEC Chapter Treasurer's Training

Meetings will be held virtually until it is safe to meet in person

For details about meeting times and how to join a meeting, call the RPEC office at 1-800-562-6097 or view the calendar on the RPEC website at: <https://rpecwa.org/calendar-3/>

– James Cockburn, RPEC Executive Director