

San Carlos Apache Tribe: Impact of HHS LIHWAP Funds

The San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation encompasses 1.8 million acres in Gila, Graham, and Pinal Counties in Southeastern Arizona. The Reservation is home to approximately 16,600 Tribal members, 7,000 of whom are under 18 years old. With an unemployment rate of approximately 65%, both jobs and housing are scarce. The majority of families on the reservation receive benefits through assistance programs for low-income households including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid.

The vast area and rural setting of the Reservation present challenges to the access of drinking water and wastewater services. Approximately one-third of the estimated 2,510 occupied housing units on the Reservation are served by the centralized water and sewer systems operated by the Water Distribution and Wastewater Treatment Facilities Program (WDWTFP). The remaining two-thirds of the housing units have decentralized water and sewer systems, or no water or sewer infrastructure at all.

In 2021, the Tribe applied for the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). They were granted \$310,510 in FY2021 and implementation began in January 2022. The Tribe's assistance program was managed and operated by the Tribal Social Services Department.

The Tribe's initial goal was to use LIHWAP funds to restore service for households whose drinking water and wastewater services had been disconnected due to nonpayment. While the Tribe did not implement water shutoffs during COVID-19, some households had already been disconnected to drinking water and wastewater services for many years and continued to have no access to public drinking water. By the end of 2021, the total arrearage balance for households on the Reservation was approximately \$250,000. As COVID-19 programs ended, the San Carlos Water Company informed families that they needed to pay outstanding water bills to avoid disconnection.

Fortunately, LIHWAP funds were available to help households that needed assistance paying their water bills and arrearage balances. households that needed assistance paying their water bills and arrearage balances. everyone on the reservation. San Carlos Water mailed the applications to their customers. The Tribe also advertised the LIHWAP in the local Apache Messenger Newspaper, which has a circulation of about 5,000 copies.

The need was significant, and families came in droves to apply. LIHWAP funds were used to pay for water bills and to empty septic tanks. An overwhelming number of applications were also submitted requesting repairs to water lines, sewer lines, and plumbing fixtures. While these repairs were not eligible under LIHWAP, the Tribal Social Services Department worked to refer families to other resources.

“LIHWAP monies were put to good use and it helped children, elders and families. Then the LIHWAP monies were gone and everyone to this day asks about water bottles.” — Director, Tribal Social Services, San Carlos Apache Tribe

During LIHWAP, the Tribe experienced a water main break in the 7 Mile Wash District of the Reservation and pump failure at three locations. While the Tribe worked to repair the equipment, families were left without drinking water. The Tribe coordinated with HHS and received approval to use LIHWAP funds to purchase cases of bottled water. The need was so great that bottled water was backordered at the local supermarket, Bashas', and it had to be ordered from Phoenix, AZ.

The Tribe considers LIHWAP to be a success in restoring access to water services for Tribal members, including providing bottled water, paying arrearages, and reducing rates to prevent disconnection of water services. HHS's Annual LIHWAP Dashboard reports that the program assisted approximately 2,000 households in the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation.

Beginning October 1, 2023, the Tribe entered the closeout phase for their LIHWAP and could no longer accept additional applications. The need for assistance accessing drinking water services remains.