

Puget Sound Energy Equity Advisory Group Meeting

Meeting Summary

Tuesday, February 17, 2026 | 5 – 7 p.m.

Meeting purpose & topics

Equity Advisory Group (EAG) meeting objectives:

- Tribal Relations – understand how PSE works with Tribes and some key learnings from these collaborations
- Disconnections – understand regulatory landscape, why disconnections are a tool used by the utility, and how PSE seeks to mitigate negative impacts to customers facing disconnection

Agenda

1. Opening – 5:00 p.m.
2. Tribal Relations – 5:20 p.m.
3. Break – 6:00 p.m.
4. Disconnections – 6:10 p.m.
5. Public comment – 6:55 p.m.
6. Next Steps – 7:00 p.m.
7. Adjourn – 7:00 p.m.

Meeting summary

Below is a summary of the presentations and discussions from the February 17, 2026 EAG meeting. A recording of the presentation portions of the meeting is also available on the [EAG YouTube channel](#).

Opening

Uncommon Bridges Facilitator Ishmael Nuñez called the meeting to order at 5:00pm. The meeting began with housekeeping announcements, and instead of a safety moment, a moment of remembrance for Ivan Garcia, an apprentice line worker who lost his life on the job. Em Piro emphasized the importance of safety, highlighting that behind every infrastructure and affordability discussion are real people whose dedication is essential to community well-being. She also noted that the IBEW has set up a fundraiser for his family on their website.

EAG Member Elizabeth Vaughn then delivered an equity moment on the value of diversity in leadership, summarizing research that links diverse leadership to organizational success and improved staff well-being. Members acknowledged the importance of these themes and connected them to broader conversations about workplace well-being, especially for people with diverse identities.

Announcements included reminders to attend or review the February 26th Resource Planning Advisory Group (RPAG) meeting, and recognitions for Black History Month, Lunar New Year, and Ramadan. The agenda overviewed upcoming presentations on Tribal Relations and Disconnections, as well as an opportunity for public comment. Ishmael also gave a shout-out to Western Washington University policy students attending the meeting for credit.

Tribal Relations

Katherine Romero, Government Relations Manager at PSE and a Nooksack tribal member, along with Nate Davern, Manager of Government Affairs & Public Policy, presented on PSE's Tribal Government Affairs team's work. Customer Outreach Manager Jessica McColgin was also available to provide added context on direct outreach work with Tribes and customers who are Tribal members, in addition to governmental relations. Katherine brings 22 years of experience in tribal government, including 12 years as an elected Tribal Council member, and leads PSE's Tribal Relations. She described the department's mission to act as a bridge between PSE and sovereign tribal nations. She emphasized that tribal relations are fundamentally about equity, justice, and honoring historical relationships that have shaped the region, requiring specialized protocols that go beyond typical customer service.

The presentation laid out a series of examples that exhibit PSE's relationship-first approach, which centers on listening to tribal priorities, supporting tribal-led initiatives rather than imposing solutions, and integrating cultural values into energy planning. Katherine introduced the concept of "social license"—the ongoing acceptance and approval a utility needs from communities beyond just legal permits—positioning it as core to PSE's work. The team's approach requires cultural competency, respect for tribal sovereignty and self-determination, and building authentic long-term relationships through consistent presence and proper consultation protocols. For this reason, in addition to working directly with Tribes, the team works on building competency and capacity within PSE staff to understand the cultural contexts and specific protocols of working with Tribal nations.

Nate shared two example case studies of PSE's work with the Nisqually and Suquamish tribes, demonstrating how relationship-first approaches led to significant outcomes. The Nisqually example showed a long-term relationship, starting with the Tribe's invitation to PSE to a resource sharing dinner, at which PSE offered technical observations on opportunities the Tribe

might consider for energy upgrades. This led to a long-term, organic, collaborative relationship, which has resulted in a range of energy projects executed in collaboration. The Suquamish relationship is newer, and is the outcome of specific outreach campaigns, listening sessions, and collaborative exploration of the Tribe's options and priorities around energy, out of which they are defining projects on an ongoing basis. Jessica McColgin and Nate noted, for example, that the Suquamish Tribe provided early feedback which helped shape and reinforce the need for PSE's innovative multi-family solar program, though the Tribe has not yet been able to utilize PSE's program due to limited funding from the WA Department of Commerce. Katherine and outlined the Tribal Strategic Energy Planning Toolkit, which includes technical assistance and capacity building resources to help tribes develop their own energy expertise, streamlined partnership development processes to reduce barriers for tribal engagement, a long-term relationship framework that sustains partnerships beyond individual projects, and coordination with federal and state initiatives to maximize resources and avoid duplication while helping tribes navigate complex multi-agency relationships. They shared PSE's business case for tribal partnerships, including clean energy advancement, risk management, operational benefits, and enhanced social license to operate. The presentation underscored that strong tribal partnerships are essential infrastructure for PSE's clean energy future, creating mutual benefits while positioning the company as an industry leader in responsible utility management.

An EAG member recognized and appreciated PSE's partnership with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. Their tribal council recently adopted its Strategic Energy Plan and the implementation is in progress.

Key Takeaways

- Appreciation for the relationship-centered approach: Participants expressed appreciation for PSE's intentionality and thoughtfulness in meeting tribes where they are, with comments highlighting this as inspiring work that could serve as a model for other utilities. Members confirmed that PSE's approach is working effectively in practice, with tribal partners experiencing genuine partnership rather than overwhelming outreach.
- Educational value: The presentation was recognized as having strong educational value, with participants noting the helpful language and approach as applicable to other fields (e.g. cultural resource management, natural resource management). The presentation generated interest in potential educational partnerships and knowledge sharing opportunities, suggesting the approach has broader teaching and training applications.
- Broader applicability: A member noted that aspects of PSE's culturally responsive approach may be applicable to work with other Named Communities.
- Recognition of program evolution and impact: Participants acknowledged the significant improvement and "leveling up" of PSE's tribal relations approach, particularly noting consistency and relationship-building methods.

Specific feedback and questions can be found in [Attachment B: Q&A](#)

Break

The group held a break from 6:00 – 6:10 p.m.

Disconnections

Nicole Eagle presented on PSE's approach to disconnections, continuing the regulatory topic on Disconnections process from May 19, 2025 EAG meeting. While the regulatory requirement was met at the May meeting, this follow-up session was scheduled so that EAG members can complete the unfinished discussion and provide comments and ask questions on this topic. Nicole shared that PSE views disconnections as a last resort and that no one wants customers to face service interruption. Nicole outlined the system's design to prevent disconnections through various energy assistance programs including payment arrangements, budget billing, bill assistance programs for income-qualified customers, energy efficiency tools, and emergency support resources like the Warm Home Fund. When customers are disconnected for non-payment, accounts are closed and final-billed, but upon reconnection, customers start with a new account at zero balance with no reconnection fees.

The presentation centered on a case study examining pre- and post-pandemic data, including the period when disconnections were prohibited under the moratorium. Data from the COVID-19 moratorium period (2020-2022) showed that while disconnects were suspended, customer arrearages grew significantly, which later proved difficult for many to manage. During this time, customer arrearages grew exponentially, with some residential customers accumulating balances exceeding \$10,000 monthly. Nicole noted that \$480 million in assistance was distributed across approximately 985,000 customers (with some receiving help from multiple sources) through a combination of PSE, federal, state, and LIHEAP funding sources. She emphasized that without these programs, arrearages would have been significantly higher and disconnections would likely have increased substantially. Nicole explained that combining federal, state, and company funds enabled nearly \$480M dollars in assistance, but many COVID-specific programs were temporary.

Nicole explained that while higher arrearages might seem manageable to customers initially, they create long-term challenges that become overwhelming and limit program options. During the moratorium, PSE heard frustration from customers questioning why their balances were allowed to grow so large without disconnection. The presentation included analysis of disconnection trends by vulnerable groups (highly impacted communities, vulnerable populations, known low-income, deepest need customers) showing that assistance programs appear to be working, with average past-due balances decreasing from 2022 to 2025 across most customer groups.

She concluded by reframing disconnections from "failures" to "learning opportunities," acknowledging progress made while identifying ongoing work including language access improvements, enhanced outreach, and customized approaches for different customer situations. The session moved to a closed discussion format to allow for more detailed conversation about these sensitive topics.

Key Takeaways

- Technical and policy engagement: Members engaged with the technical and policy aspects of disconnections, recognizing multiple contributing factors (federal policy, variable funding streams, temporary versus permanent assistance programs) and thoughtfully considering the impacts of these interrelated factors.
- Systemic impacts: Members considered broader systemic effects, such as how managing arrearages affects all ratepayers and ensuring equitable access to assistance across different customer segments.
- Appreciation for transparency: Members valued Nicole's candid presentation of challenging data, including significant pandemic-era arrearages, while recognizing the complexity of balancing customer support with utility operations.
- Focus on operational equity: Members discussed how policies translate into practice, particularly the challenges of reaching "hidden customers" and ensuring current approaches effectively serve all vulnerable populations needing assistance.
- Recognition of ongoing improvement: Members expressed appreciation for Nicole's leadership and viewed disconnections as evolving, collaborative work toward better outcomes rather than a static problem. They acknowledged both progress made and continued opportunities for refinement, recognizing disconnections as a tool for equitable service delivery while understanding the challenges faced by customer outreach teams. When invited for additional follow-up discussion, members indicated they were satisfied with the coverage of this topic.

Specific feedback and questions can be found in [Attachment B: Q&A](#)

Public Comment:

Ishmael Nuñez facilitated a brief public comment period, allowing attendees to voice their thoughts and concerns. While no verbal public comment was given, multiple viewer questions from the YouTube Live were fielded during the meeting and captured in the attached feedback report.

Next Steps:

Members were encouraged to indicate their interest and availability for continued conversations on disconnections, with options to join a follow-up session or to provide input via chat or email. The next EAG meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 16, 2026.

Adjournment:

The meeting concluded at 7:00 p.m.

Attachment A: Meeting Attendees

Equity Advisory Group members

1. Jenny Harding, GSBA and New Chapter Weddings and Events
2. Elizabeth Vaughn, Sustainable Connections
3. TJ Protho, Community Advocate
4. Dennis Suarez, Community Advocate
5. Megan Walsh, Community Advocate
6. Demeco Walters, Community Advocate
7. Karia Wong, Chinese Information and Service Center (CISC)
8. Marco Morales, Community Advocate
9. Glenda Duldulao, Asian Pacific Cultural Center
10. Rachel Gates, Community Advocate

Puget Sound Energy

11. Troy Hutson, Director Energy Equity
12. Yvonne Wang, Manager Energy Equity
13. Em Piro, Energy Equity Program Manager - Community Partnerships
14. Katherine Romero, Government Relations Manager
15. Nate Davern, Manager, Government Affairs & Public Policy
16. Nicole Eagle, Manager – Credit Collections
17. Kelima Yakupova, State & Regional Policy Consultant
18. Jessica McColgin, Manager, Customer and Community Outreach

Consultant Staff

19. Ishmael Nuñez, Uncommon Bridges
20. Ariam Ford, Uncommon Bridges
21. Carson Bridges, Uncommon Bridges

Attachment B: Q&A and Feedback Report

Topic	Question/Comment	PSE response
Logistics	Will we go over RPAG materials/recordings in the March meeting?	Members are asked to review the February 26 RPAG meeting and materials prior to the March EAG meeting as part of their preparation for the meeting.
Tribal Relations	Can you give an example where Cultural Integration changed energy planning from traditionally corporate?	Katherine and Nate provided the Lummi Nation pole replacement example. Unlike standard utility practice of installing new poles next to existing ones, Lummi Nation requires "replacement in place" due to cultural concerns about disturbing potentially sacred burial sites or culturally significant land. This is more costly and time-intensive but PSE follows this protocol as standard practice on Lummi property, with stricter controls to ensure all crews (including out-of-state emergency crews) follow this cultural requirement.
Tribal Relations	[From public]: What is the rough estimate of time between the "How it started" and "Current scope" for the Nisqually Case Study?	Nate and Jessica confirmed the first project started in March-April 2023, snowballed from one facility to six within a couple months, and all 11 lighting projects were completed by end of 2023. The partnership has continued for about 3 years now with ongoing projects and savings leading to new project cycles.
Tribal Relations	[From public]: Have you ever met opposition with tribal nations? How do you deal with those situations? Does PSE continue to try and forge a relationship after such opposition?	Yes, PSE has encountered opposition from tribal nations with regard to projects. In each case that a project meets opposition, PSE evaluates the need for the project and whether alternatives are available or feasible from an operational perspective. If an alternative option can be utilized, PSE works with the tribal nation on that option; if no alternative exists, PSE may still pursue projects if the situation warrants.

		The operations of our organization in partnership with the tribal nations that we serve may well exceed the lifespan of any particular project that we undertake, so PSE strives to preserve and strengthen relationships with tribal nations we serve even during, or following completion of a contentious project. Repairing relationships with the tribe following the completion of a contentious project may take time, if they are able to be repaired at all, but PSE will still strive to deliver excellent service to the tribe (if it is a customer) and develop other working relationships with them as the tribe feels appropriate.
Tribal Relations	There is a real parallel with BIPOC communities, where these lessons from Tribal relations can be used to advance those communities as well.	Thank you for your comment.
Tribal Relations	It would be great if everyone who wanted to work with tribes was considering all of these cultural resource and natural resource management aspects. As a vegetation person, I loved what you said about clearing vegetation to put up new poles and how that can impact harvesting of cultural resources.	Thank you for this acknowledgement. Following culturally appropriate processes has been a central part to the Tribal Relations approach.
Tribal Relations	Katherine has leveled up the relationship and approach. I really appreciate the whole approach and how the work is done.	Thank you for this acknowledgement.
Tribal Relations	I really appreciate the intentionality, the thoughtfulness and determination for meeting the Tribes where they are and supporting them all the way. Thank you for all the hard and heart work, Katherine!	Katherine brings consistency, cultural competency, and authentic relationship building to our work with sovereign Tribal nations and has made contributions across the Utility. We are very grateful for her leadership at PSE.
Disconnections	Did the \$480M funds come from PSE, Federal Govt, or a combination?	Yes, it was a combination including PSE-funded programs, state funding from commerce, LIHEAP

		funding, and new programs like past due bill forgiveness and Head Start benefit that utilized existing program funding.
Disconnections	Is the funding stream stable?	Many COVID programs were "one and done" as they ended when funding was dispersed, but traditional programs remain stable including PSE Help, LIHEAP funding, past due bill forgiveness, bill discount rate, and Warm Home Fund.
Disconnections	How much money went to the business community in WA State? What was the average company size that received assistance?	Income qualified programs today and anything additional during COVID are centered around residential customers, only.
Disconnections	Does a "reset" mean PSE closes the account, absorbs the cost, and the reconnecting account starts at zero?	When disconnected for non-payment, the account is closed and final-billed with a collection process for unpaid amounts. Upon reconnection, customers get a brand new account starting at zero balance with no reconnection fees or deposit, at this time.
Disconnections	How does lowering arrearages protect other ratepayers? Will it impact rates for other customers?	The funding to help customers lower arrearages come from customer rates, so all residential customers pay for this. When arrearages become too high and PSE isn't able to recover the amount, it can put a financial strain on PSE's ability to serve its customers. Another consideration is the company's bad debt, and the cost impact that also has on all ratepayers.
Disconnections	Do many individuals with bills over \$10k fit into vulnerable factors? Were they taking advantage of the system? / <i>Related Question: Request for a data-informed understanding of the vulnerability of households with large unpaid accounts</i>	We have been working with the Data Analytics team to provide an analysis of this request. The data will be made available to EAG members by the end of March, 2026.

Disconnections	Is there a time frame for disconnection (e.g., if a customer pays partially but never the total)?	The timeframe for outreach on past-due balances and disconnection is illustrated on slide 33 from the captured in the meeting summary in the Q&A: The field visit occurs between days 20 - 30 from the time the customer entered the process. That does not mean disconnection because the customer might tell us they are seeking assistance or so we will not proceed. We have ten days max to do this or the process starts over.
Disconnections	How often can a customer enroll in a program (yearly, monthly)?	Most of the income qualified programs are once per program year (such as PSE HELP, LIHEAP), while one is every two years (Past Due Bill Forgiveness).
Disconnections	How does PSE decide who goes to collections?	When a final bill has been issued and it goes unpaid; it's simply based on a balance threshold that determines if further collection treatment happens.
Disconnections	Is there interest charged on the amount owed?	No, there is no interest charged or assessed to the customer.
Disconnections	What does "boots on the ground" outreach look like for reaching disconnected customers and understanding barriers?	PSE does a lot of work to engage customers who face barriers to participation in our program. While the on-the-ground Outreach team doesn't have information on individual customers, we engage customers in various ways such as through Community-Based Organizations to share information about our programs with them and to help them sign up for our programs. We have a thorough planning process to identify customer segments who may have greater need for our assistance programs, understand their barriers and design ways to address those barriers so they can engage in our programs.

Disconnections	Great discussion. Great follow up from last year. My questions are answered – I appreciate this information. Thank you, Nicole, for your dedication.	Thank you for your engaging and thoughtful questions and discussion. We appreciate all the contributions you have made to this and other programs that support accessibility, affordability, and accountability across PSE, and we are glad we were able to return to this topic with you all.
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