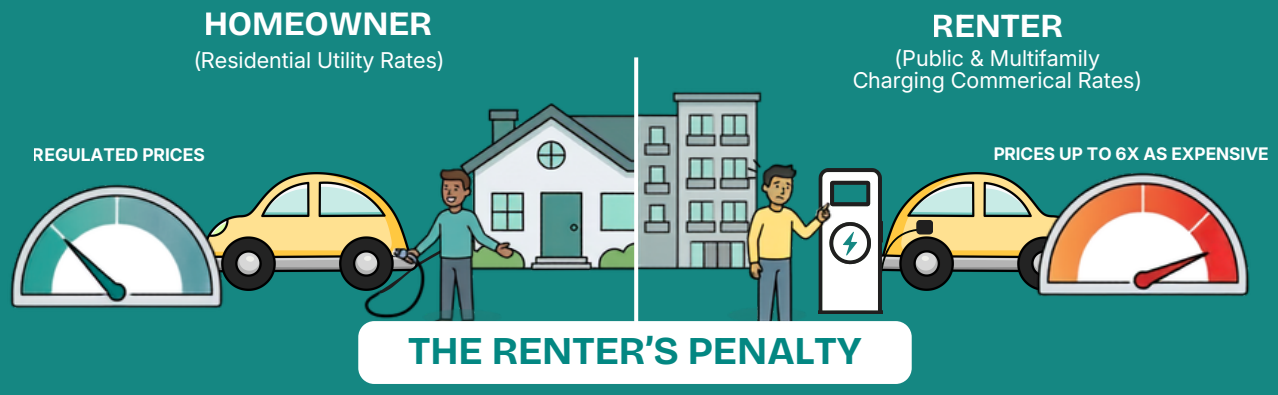
Utility Brief

GRID ALTERNATIVES

Affordable EV Charging for Low-Income Renters and Multifamily Housing

As the transportation sector electrifies, a structural divide is emerging between customers. While homeowners benefit from EV charging at regulated residential prices, tens of millions of renters and multifamily housing residents experience fragmented, volatile EV charging prices. This is a **"renter's penalty", where charging at a public DC fast charging station costs up to 6 times more than charging at a single-family home.**

For utilities, this pricing disparity presents a strategic opportunity to extend affordable rate relief to users of public or on-site multifamily housing chargers. By expanding income-qualified benefits beyond a static home meter to also apply to public or multifamily housing on-site chargers, utilities can ensure that financial relief moves dynamically with the driver. This transition ensures that the utility's commitment to affordability is tied to the customer rather than their housing type, avoiding the "renter's penalty" and providing a consistent, predictable fueling cost for every driver.



The Need for Low-Income Charging Programs

Most discussions of low-income energy burden focus exclusively on utility bills, overlooking the most volatile line item in American household budgets: the **cost of gasoline.** An ACEEE study found that for low-income families, the gasoline burden consumes about **14% of their income**, a necessary expense subject to international volatility and unregulated markets. Amid rising gas prices, consumers are seeking affordable fuel with predictable prices, a value proposition that utilities are uniquely positioned to deliver.

While the transition to electric vehicles (EVs) promises **relief from the burden of gasoline prices,** a new gap is widening based on **housing type.** Those with at-home charging currently utilize set residential rates tied to their residential meter, making EVs significantly cheaper to refuel than traditional gasoline cars. Homeowners enrolled in a utility discount program can charge for even less. These programs create thousands of dollars in benefits each year for those with residential-rate-tied charging, but result in a significant economic divide for the **tens of millions of renters and multi-family housing residents** who are disproportionately low-income but unable to access residential charging rates.

The Opportunity: Low-Income Charging Programs

While utilities hold the primary levers for rate-setting, providing affordability for low-income renters requires flexible delivery models. Utility decision-makers can choose the pathway that best aligns with their operational goals, whether through direct management or third-party integrations.

Utilities can choose to build a portable, driver-tethered program that shifts income-qualified benefits beyond just a static home meter through a prepaid charging card or discounts on the individual customer's account. By utilizing roaming platforms, Application Programming Interface (API) integrations, or prepaid restricted debit cards, utilities can ensure that financial relief moves dynamically with the driver. This approach allows low-income renters to unlock discounted rates across an expansive web of third-party public chargers, ensuring that gasoline burden relief is not restricted by a driver's housing constraints or daily commute.

Utilities can also deploy a site-specific, network-tethered model by applying direct low-income discounts to their own utility-owned and operated public or multifamily housing on-site charging infrastructure. This strategy allows utilities to anchor public fueling costs directly to residential rates, establishing rate parity so a renter using a utility-owned curbside charger pays the same rate as a homeowner charging in a garage.

Finally, utilities can implement a blended, multi-layered strategy that integrates both models to eliminate the "renter's penalty" more robustly. Under this comprehensive framework, fixed discounts on utility-owned infrastructure serve as highly visible, reliable equity anchors in target neighborhoods, maximizing the utilization and community trust of utility-owned assets. Meanwhile, portable digital benefits operate alongside the physical network as a persistent safety net, filling geographic gaps and protecting individual drivers whenever they travel outside the utility's immediate hardware footprint.

Utility Benefits

Beyond immediate affordability, low-income charging programs optimize the utility's role as the primary fuel provider:

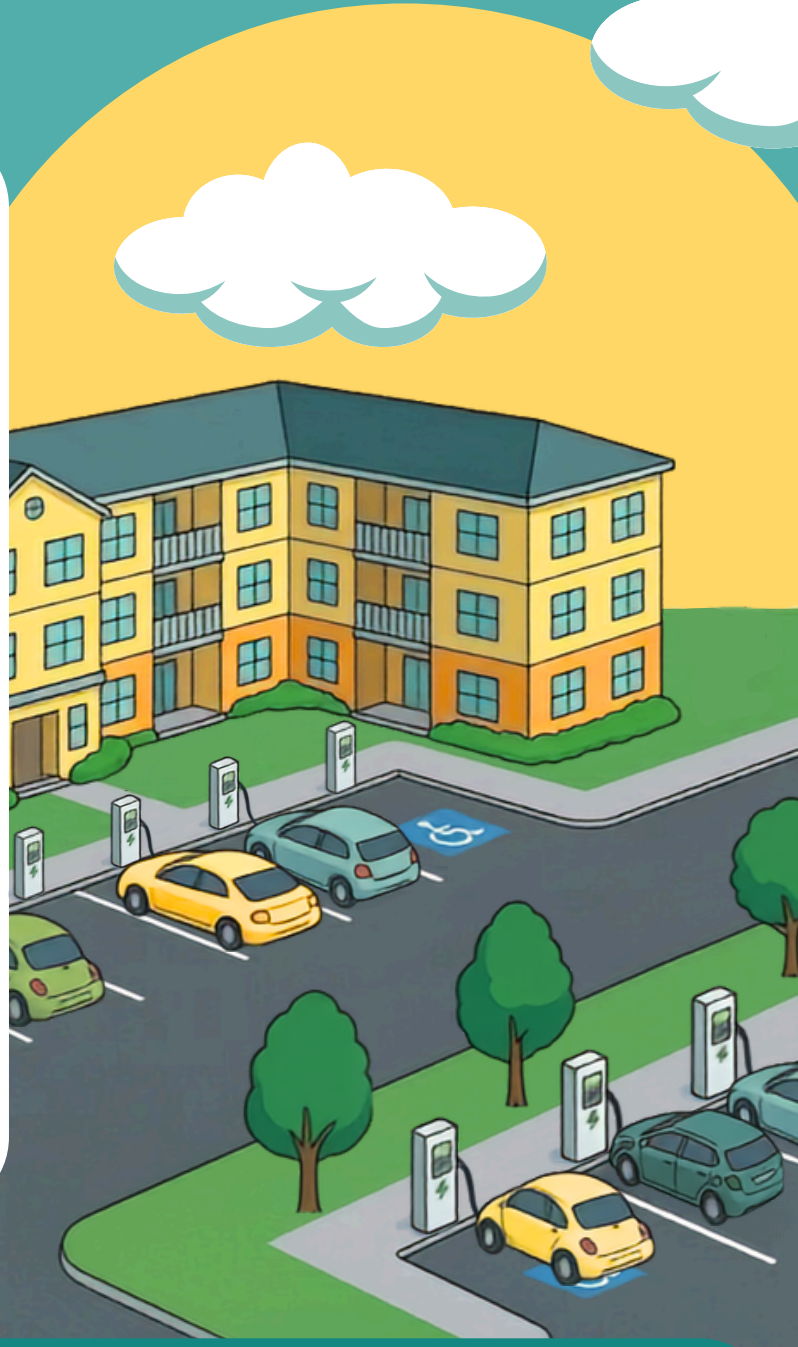
Partner in Affordability: By addressing the "renter's penalty", utilities move from being a "bill in the mail" to a partner in a household's economic resilience. Offering low-income charging programs demonstrates a commitment to affordability for households that need savings the most.

Maximizing Asset Utilization: Closing the affordability gap ensures that the utility's investment in transportation electrification infrastructure reaches its full potential. By expanding the user base to include more low-income renters, utilities prevent under-utilization of public and multifamily charging assets.

Optimizing System Load Factor: Tiered pricing structures can incentivize charging during periods of solar over-generation or low demand, optimizing grid utilization, reducing strain during peak hours, and potentially avoiding costly distribution upgrades.

The Strategic Path Forward

To scale EV adoption, utilities can evolve their business models by extending income-qualified electric discounts beyond the residential meter and integrating affordability programs into public or multifamily shared EV chargers. By leveraging data to demonstrate the fiscal benefits of optimized system load and gas-to-electric revenue capture, utility staff can move beyond temporary pilots to establish long-term, regional affordability standards. This strategic shift transforms the utility into a leader in economic resilience, providing the predictable fueling costs necessary for all customers to successfully transition to a clean energy future. By modernizing discount programs to address the "renter's penalty" and gasoline burden, utilities ensure that the benefits of clean transportation are a shared reality rather than a housing-dependent luxury.



Let's Do This!

Further Reading: To see what utilities across the country are doing, click here to see a detailed **"Utility Playbook"** with affordable charging pilot snapshots.

Free Technical Assistance Available: If you're interested in exploring how to bring this type of program to your community, contact GRID Alternatives:

- Zach Franklin, Strategic Impact Officer: zfranklin@gridalternatives.org
- Linda Khamoushian, Senior Clean Mobility Strategist: lkhamoushian@gridalternatives.org

GRID Alternatives is the country's largest nonprofit that makes renewable energy technologies like solar power, battery storage, EV charging, and EVs accessible to underserved communities. Thanks in part to generous philanthropic support from General Motors and others, GRID Alternatives supports utilities and other electric providers to design, implement, and evaluate EV charging projects for low-income EV drivers, including renters, multifamily affordable housing communities, and low-income homeowners.