

NJTODAY.NET

New Jersey's oldest weekly newspaper

Your neighborhood in print since July 13, 1822

News Record **PATRIOT** *THE* ATOM TABLOID
© Citizens-Gazette

CMD
media

online
24/7
since
2002

NJ 2-1-1 To Serve As Home Heating Assistance Hotline

September 27, 2012

WHIPPANY – New Jersey residents who are wondering what they can do to manage the cost of home heating this winter can dial 2-1-1 to find out about programs that may be able to help them.

NJ 2-1-1, a free and confidential statewide information and referral service, available 24/7 was recently asked to serve as the state's Home Energy Assistance and Universal Service Fund Hotline. There are several home energy assistance programs available for New Jersey residents who meet certain income eligibility guidelines. By simply calling 2-1-1, residents can learn about these programs, the eligibility criteria and local agencies who process applications.

"Utility assistance is the number one reason people have called us for help over the past seven years. It was natural that we would want to expand our ability to help by adding access to these very important energy assistance programs through the 2-1-1 dialing code," explains Laura Zink Marx, executive director of NJ 2-1-1.

One application covers the three utility assistance programs in New Jersey, LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program), USF (Universal Service Fund) and the Weatherization Assistance Program. Applications for LIHEAP will be accepted beginning Oct. 1 this year and continues through April 30, 2013. USF and weatherization applications are accepted all year round.

Through LIHEAP residents can reduce home heating and medically necessary cooling costs. Those eligible for the program must be responsible for their own heating expenses and have an income that is less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which for a household of four would be \$46,100 annually. LIHEAP assistance can help those eligible catch up on overdue utility bills or bills for deliverable fuel.

USF is designed to lower the amount paid for gas and electricity and is available to residents earning less than 175% of the FPL (\$40,338 for a household of four), and paying more than 3% of their annual income on electric or gas, or more than 6% if they have electric heat. Only customers of the seven regulated natural gas and electric companies in our state are eligible for USF. The Weatherization Assistance Program provides free comprehensive energy conservation improvements to home owners whose income falls below 200% of the FPL, resulting in lower energy consumption and increased savings overall.

"If a caller does not meet the eligibility criteria for these home energy assistance programs, staff will search the NJ 2-1-1 database of over 5,900 providers and more than 13,400 services to find other local resources that may be able to help," Marx says. "We spend time exploring with alternative financial solutions." Included among the possibilities is TRUE (Temporary Relief for Utility Expenses), a one-time grant program to help low-to-moderate income residents with utility expenses; NJShares also offers energy assistance in the form of a grant to middle income residents. "It can be confusing and frustrating to the consumer when trying to figure out where to turn. NJ 2-1-1 can help unravel the options."

The Home Energy Assistance hotline is just one of the initiatives that NJ 2-1-1 has undertaken in recent years. The organization serves as New Jersey's Addiction Services Hotline; does the initial screening for the state's Kinship Navigator program; works closely with VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters) and NJ Office of Emergency Management in disaster preparedness, response and recovery; and so much more. NJ 2-1-1 is supported by the United Ways of NJ in partnership with the State of NJ.