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Fuel assistance applications available early

By CHRIS GAROFOLO

BRATTLEBORO -- While the chilly New England winter is still months away, the state opened the application process for fuel assistance on July 15.

The program is offered by the state and helps low-income families pay a portion of their home heating bills. It is available to residents making a net income of up to 125 percent of the federal poverty level.

"Vermont is unique that it limits the seasonal fuel assistance programs to those with very low income, but it provides more of a benefit than other states," said Matt Cota, executive director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association.

While Vermont has a stricter income requirement than neighboring states, it also provides more assistance than others. Some states offer 50 percent assistance, whereas in Vermont it is closer to 60-75 percent, said Cota.

In April, the Vermont fuel office released a report indicating the state received more than 40,000 applications requesting seasonal fuel assistance.

"Please get those seasonal fuel applications in," said Pat Burke, Family Services director with Southeast Vermont Community Action. "Sign up now, don't wait, don't delay."

Assistance is for both homeowners and renters who pay for heat or when heat is included in the rent. Residents must apply before the first day in February.

"It's such a preventative measure to get something in your tank early rather than wait for it to run out," said Burke.

Between October 2008 and May 31 2009, SEVCA

spent more than \$503,000 assisting residents with fuel and utility emergencies in Windham and Windsor counties.

Of that money distribution, \$340,466 came from the state crisis fuel funds and \$163,284 came from SEVCA's other funding sources.

The Crisis Fuel Assistance program begins on the last Monday of November and runs until the last Friday in April. Eligibility is up to 150 percent of the federal income level and the fuel user must experience a crisis.

Last July, the country experienced the highest prices for petroleum in history. "Crude oil in the middle of July (last year), we're talking about a winter tsunami," said Cota.

The fuel prices may have declined from last year, but the state adjusted benefits are down as well, said Burke. "So folks will be seeing lower benefits than they did last year."

Residents interested in more information may contact SEVCA at 802-722-4575 or contact the Office of Home Heating Fuel Assistance through the

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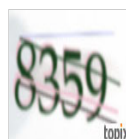
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