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Gov. opens heating benefit

By [Josh O'Gorman](#) STAFF WRITER

SPRINGFIELD — Gov. James Douglas was on hand Monday morning to kick off an annual campaign to help struggling Vermonters with fuel and housing assistance.

Representatives from Southeastern Vermont Community Action and WCFR radio were at the Springfield Royal Diner to launch the third annual Share the Warmth campaign with the goal of raising \$75,000 to help residents who are not eligible for federally funded fuel assistance.

"This is a particularly difficult and challenging time for agencies like SEVCA because the economy is so soft. We have unemployment that hasn't been this high since the Great Depression," said Douglas before he presented a check to SEVCA Executive Director Steve Geller. "Some are finding it difficult to maintain their homes because they lost their jobs or are earning less and just can't afford to keep their family budget balanced."

SEVCA has seen a rise in the number of Windsor and Windham county residents seeking housing assistance. In 2006, they distributed \$53,000 in emergency housing assistance. Three years later, that number tripled to \$165,000. In response, SEVCA is looking to raise more money to help people stay in their homes, Geller said.

"Fuel is always going to be a serious problem, but if they have no home, they'll have nothing to heat," Geller said.

Share the Warmth began in October 2007 when SEVCA staff met with WCFR General Manager Ray Kimball to discuss the rising cost of fuel oil and how it would affect low-income residents. That first year the campaign raised about \$19,000.

"I know there are people out there sleeping in their cars or warming themselves in front of the oven," Kimball said. "It really is a gift to me to participate in the process of changing that."

Sean Cota, president of fuel company Cota & Cota, was also present at the event.

"We've had a long relationship with SEVCA, and our focus has always been to help folks in emergencies to get heat and to help SEVCA winterize low-income houses throughout Windsor and Windham counties," said Cota, whose company is the main sponsor for the campaign.

In 2007-08, SEVCA provided \$196,503 in weatherization assistance to 108 people in 36 homes.

The program targets Vermonters who earn too much money to receive federal assistance but are still struggling to heat or even keep their homes, said SEVCA Development Director Lisa Jane Clarke.

"This is for people who have worked their whole lives and who have now hit hard times," Clarke said. "It's very difficult for them to ask for help."

In the meantime, SEVCA is taking applications for the Wood Warms campaign, which distributes firewood cut from state lands.

For information about fuel and housing assistance, call SEVCA at 722-4575 or visit www.sevca.org. For more information about the Share the warmth campaign, visit www.sharethewarmth.info.

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