

## Don't go broke to keep warm

Energy programs offer help for those in need

By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD – MaryEllen Tierney and her 6-year-old daughter were in their first apartment last year, but by Thanksgiving, the bills were too much.

“The bills far outweighed the income,” she recalled. “I used to get a bill and say ‘I can't pay it,’ and so I wouldn't even look at it. But I was only hurting myself.”

Through a friend she heard about the Low Income Heating Energy Assistance Program, which is administered locally through the Berkshire Community Action Council (BCAC).

So she confronted her pride, realizing that the welfare of her daughter was more important, and made the call for help.

“You keep wondering how did it get to this, but I decided I can't focus on that, I have to survive and take care of my daughter, even if it means getting assistance,” said Tierney, a Pittsfield resident.

At BCAC, they helped her to make sense of her bills, budget her money and set priorities. She is caught up now and has better control of her situation, and aggressive about conserving energy and saving money.

Tierney was speaking as part of a presentation at BCAC to publicize the Energy Bucks program, a clearinghouse for all the various heating assistance programs provided by state agencies, nonprofits and utility companies.

According to Don Atwater, BCAC executive director, there are likely to be more than 8,000 households that will qualify for at least one of the Energy Bucks programs, which comes out to about 13,000 people, or 10 percent of the county's populace.

### Up to 30 percent savings

According to written statements distributed at the meeting, qualified families can save up to 30 percent a year on energy bills.

Last year, 5,600 Berkshire families applied for home heating aid through LIHEAP, said Atwater.

And there are a number of other programs,

including those provided by the utility companies, that can either help pay the heating bills, defer the payments for a time, or help pay for home repairs or heating system upgrades to conserve energy and reduce the heating bill.

MaryEllen Tierney of Pittsfield learned how to budget her money — and operate a caulking gun — through Berkshire Community Action Council programs.

Photo by Ben Garver /  
Berkshire Eagle Staff



The challenge, said Atwater, is that “many people are reluctant to ask about energy assistance programs. So we have to go above and beyond to reach them.”

Kate Agin, a community outreach representative for Western Massachusetts Electric, said the two biggest barriers to people taking advantage of the energy assistance programs are pride and language differences. But whatever the reason, when people starting having to choose between food and heat, or between prescription medication and heat, they need to seek assistance.

“We really want people to know there is no stigma to asking for help,” she said.

“Just asking may be the hardest part, but there is money to help,” said Atwater.

Tierney expressed gratitude for the program, noting that while she is working three jobs to make ends meet, the folks at BCAC help her bring her finances into control, and helped her learn how to weatherize the apartment.

“Now I'm always on standby with a caulking gun. I'm so grateful I can do that now so I don't have to freeze,” laughed Tierney.

For more information, call (413) 445-5671 or (866) 216-6100.