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State adds money to help poor with heating bills

By Chris Landers
Capital News Service

Retired school bus driver Earl Harris and his wife, Barbara, live in the shadow of Pimlico Race Course on a fixed income of \$700 per month.

Last year's heating bills took half of that.

"You've got to eat, got a couple other bills to pay," Earl Harris said.

Gov. Robert Ehrlich went to the Harris' house Nov. 8 to announce that the state will add \$13 million to a program helping low-income families with their heating bills this winter.

"This is going to help a lot," Harris said.

In the face of spiraling costs for home heating fuels, state officials are expecting more Marylanders to apply for energy assistance. The number of people applying this year has already risen 10 to 12 percent, said Mary Lou Kueffer, director of the Office of Home Energy Programs.

Ehrlich said the program will be expanded by raising the income limits for eligibility to 175 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, the new limit is \$33,862.50 a year.

He also said a program to help winterize area homes will get an additional \$400,000, and Baltimore Gas and Electric and Constellation Energy will kick in an additional \$26 million for energy assistance and winterization programs.

He also asked state residents to "be a little more generous this winter" and to give to nonprofits that help low-income Maryland residents pay the bills.

The Maryland Energy Assistance program is largely funded by the federal government, which

gave Maryland around \$29 million last year. This year, Kueffer said, "we're hoping we get somewhat more," but she's concerned that the amount could be less.

"This extra (state) funding is going to help us tremendously," she said.

The latest projections from the federal Energy Information Administration indicate that consumers can expect to pay about 40 percent more to heat their homes with natural gas this winter than last. Heating oil will cost about 27 percent more.

Although natural gas prices fell slightly at the end of October, they remain near record levels for this time of year.

The Harrises gave a tour of their home, pointing out improvements made recently by the state and by local energy companies as part of a winterization program, such as weather stripping around the doors, expanding foam in cracks, insulation in the attic, a new door where rain used to leak into the basement, and energy-efficient light bulbs.

Before they applied for energy assistance, "Our heating bill was high," Barbara Harris said. "We had drafts. Now we don't have that."

She said she hoped her neighbors would sign up for the program.

"We have to say, 'Come forward.'" she said, adding that pride kept some from applying, but "when the cold weather hits, you don't care who knows it."