

# The Advocate-Messenger

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## Heating assistance program a life saver

By HERB BROCK

Dorothy Coontz of Danville is a 71-year-old widow whose survival depends on the generosity of government and the kindness of her son-in-law.

Coontz lives on \$386 a month she receives from the federal government's Supplemental Security Income program plus \$117 a month in food stamps. She also is eligible for the government's commodities program.

Thanks to her son-in-law, she has a decent roof over her head. But if it weren't for the government, it's doubtful she would be able to remain there.

"I used to own the house I live in, but it got to the point that I could no longer pay the taxes on it," said Coontz. "I ended up giving the house to my daughter and her husband. My daughter died, but my son-in-law still looked after me. He lets me live there."

While her son-in-law has been able to pay for the roof over Coontz's head, he cannot afford the natural gas heat that goes into the home. Since she can't afford to pay the total bill, either, Coontz has had to seek another form of government assistance - from the subsidy component of Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

"My son-in-law has remarried and is on a tight budget," she said. "He's done all he can for me, what with letting me live in his house.

"So my only alternative has been to bum for help," said Coontz, who has applied for assistance with her bills from the Bluegrass Community Action Agency, which administers LIHEAP locally, and from the Family Services Association of Boyle County.

"It is embarrassing to ask for handouts, but on my income and in my circumstances, I've had no other choice."

And, while her pride has been tested, she realizes that she needs the lifelines she receives from the government, especially LIHEAP with the weather now turning cold.

"The (LIHEAP) assistance has been a life saver for me," said Coontz. "Without it, I'd probably freeze to death."

Tommie Boykin also had warm words to say about LIHEAP.

### **In a similar situation**

Boykin, 68, is in a similar situation as Coontz. Divorced, she has lived alone for the last six years in an apartment in Latimer Heights, a Housing Authority of Danville complex. Part of her rent is paid through a government rent-subsidy program, but she must pay the rest. Her income totals \$599 a month - \$470 a month from Social Security and \$129 a month from the Supplemental Security Income program - and she said 30 percent of it goes to pay her share of the rent.

"I actually quit smoking so I could have enough to live on my own," she said. "Every little bit helps."

And the little bit that means the most to Boykin this time of year is LIHEAP.

"The program has made the difference between being comfortable and being cold in the wintertime," she said. "It is also the difference between me still being able to live on my own and living with somebody else or in some shelter."

The program also has made a difference for Mary Smith, a younger woman who also is a beneficiary.

However, Smith, like other clients, is concerned about another difference - the growing difference between the LIHEAP subsidy voucher she receives and the rising amounts on her natural gas and electricity bills.

"The subsidy rarely goes up, but the bills, especially this year, keep rising and rising," said Smith.

"Last year, the bills averaged around \$280, but my gas bill is now \$500," she said. "And my electric has gone from \$55 to \$108 a month.

Despite the growing disparity between the bills and the subsidies, Smith wouldn't know what she would do without the program.

"There are a lot more people out here in the community who need help with their heating bill than people realize," she said. "For me and people like me, the program is a Godsend."