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Signs of a tough winter beginning to show

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MONTPELIER – On the first day emergency heating help was offered Monday, 59 people came calling at the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity's Burlington office.

That kind of demand is unheard of, said Tim Searles, the office's executive director, and it's a sign of what's to come in a winter that promises record-high home-heating costs.

"This is unprecedented," Searles said. "I don't think we've ever seen more than 45 people in a day."

Home-heating oil averaged \$2.48 a gallon in Vermont in November, compared to \$2.02 a year ago. Propane rose from \$1.91 a gallon last year to \$2.25. Kerosene jumped even more – from \$2.25 to \$2.88.

The higher demand for aid was expected, given the higher cost of fuel, and as the calendar nears December, it's becoming clear the expectation was warranted.

Along with a barrage of people looking for emergency heating help, the number of applicants seeking aid through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program is running stronger than normal. About 25,900 people have applied for LIHEAP this year, compared to about 23,000 at this time last year, said Steve Dale, commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families.

Those who qualify are getting more money to help meet the higher cost of fuel, Dale said. The average check that was sent out just recently was \$1,364, compared to \$902 last year, he said.

The state has pumped in \$7 million to augment the federally funded LIHEAP. The state hopes to recover some of that money if Congress boosts its LIHEAP allocation, but

there are no guarantees.

Dale said LIHEAP applications are being processed faster than usual, something that was a subject of concern among legislators. The application of residents with a fuel emergency will be expedited if they contact their regional Community Action Office, he said.

One more piece of help surfaced Tuesday for people having a hard time paying their heating bills this winter. The AARP Foundation announced it will provide \$25 gift certificates to Home Depot for people who just missed qualifying for LIHEAP or who are on a waiting list for the weatherization program.

Greg Marchildon, state director at AARP Vermont, said \$25 can buy products such as caulking, weather stripping and plastic sheeting for drafty window and door frames.

The AARP Foundation is spending \$50,000 on Project Warm Home, of which \$45,000 will be spent on gift cards and \$1,000 will be given to each of the five regional Community Action Offices that will give out the cards.

Hal Cohen, executive director of the Central Vermont Community Action Council, said higher fuel prices have broken many household budgets that were faltering. "Many Vermonters who have been living on the edge have fallen off the edge," he said.

Like Cohen, Searles is seeing more people who can't keep up with this year's fuel bills. Many of those applying for the Crisis Fuel Program have been cut off by their utilities, or are required by the fuel deliverer to pay cash on delivery, Searles said. The program pays to get back their source of heat.

"They squeaked by last year," he said. "They can't squeak by this year."