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Volunteers Will Seal Out Cold

By John Hilton

The first step to staying warm is keeping out the cold.

That seemed like a natural place for the United Way of Carlisle and Cumberland County to begin helping homeowners cope with heating bills that are expected to increase as much as 48 percent this winter.

Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse in Carlisle is already on board. The company signed up for Gov. Ed Rendell's Stay Warm PA plan and is donating enough caulking, plastic and weather-stripping to winterize 200 homes in the county.

"Obviously, that helps keep heating costs down," says Jeff Conway, executive director of the United Way's local chapter. "We are seeking volunteers who are willing to install those items. We're also looking for homes that need this kind of stuff."

There is no "means test" or income level required to receive the winterization materials, he adds. "I believe we have enough items for this area that we can accommodate everybody."

The local United Way continues to collect money for emergency heating assistance, he says, and will meet Monday to finalize its plans for distribution of the money. United Way contributed \$10,000 to the fund.

Hard winter ahead

The federal Department of Energy projects home heating costs will rise by 48 percent this winter, in part because of hurricanes that depleted supplies and disrupted fuel deliveries from the Gulf of Mexico.

To keep pace, the federal Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) must increase its 2006 funding to states from \$3.4 billion to \$5.1 billion. Even if that were to happen, the share paid out-of-pocket by low-income residents still increases by up to 48 percent.

With the federal government facing record

budget deficits due to the war in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts, increasing LIHEAP funding is no sure thing. An amendment to increase funding by \$3.1 billion already failed to pass.

Pennsylvania received \$145 million in LIHEAP funding last year, but reportedly would need about \$355 million this year to cover additional participants and increased heating costs.

LIHEAP served about 340,000 Pennsylvania residents last year — mostly elderly, disabled or poor workers and their families. The Cumberland County assistance office provided more than \$600,000 in assistance to 2,220 residents last year, officials said.

Combining increased state funding and support from energy companies and utilities, Rendell freed up an additional \$30 million for low-income energy assistance.

"We're committed to protecting our most vulnerable and providing the help they need," the governor says.

Asked for help

At Rendell's request, Lowe's agreed to hold weatherization workshops at least on a weekly basis at senior citizen centers and other locations.

The home improvement retail chain has about 60 stores across Pennsylvania.

"Lowe's is proud to partner on this important initiative and to assist Pennsylvanians in preparing for increased heating bills expected this winter," says Frank Weber, Lowe's regional vice president. "It is our hope that our weekly clinics will help educate consumers and the donation of products will help our neighbors that are the most vulnerable to stay warm this winter."

How to volunteer

To volunteer for home winterization

training this weekend, call Jeff Conway at 243-4805.

Volunteers will gather at 10 a.m. Saturday at The Depot on the Dickinson College campus for a free training seminar on how to apply

caulking, weather-stripping and plastic to homes. The Depot is located on Cherry Street in Carlisle.