



News Release

Lifeline, Inc.

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Home Energy Assistance Program Winter Crisis Program Concludes May 19, 2020

PAINESVILLE, Ohio— The HEAP Winter Crisis Program (WCP), which began on November 1, 2019 and ran an extended season through May 1, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, served a high number of low-income households with emergency utility assistance.

Throughout the six months of the Winter Crisis Season, Lifeline's staff completed applications for 813 households from nearly every community in Lake County for emergency utility assistance. Of those 813 applications, 700 of them were approved for emergency utility assistance with either their gas or electric or the purchase of fuel oil. Over \$185,000 in federal dollars was expended over the course of the season. This is slightly less than last year's winter.

"It was definitely a busy season," said Carrie Dotson, Executive Director at Lifeline. "On our walk-in days we always had a long line at our door of folks waiting for assistance and we were always booked three or four solid weeks out for appointments. However things shifted a bit in late March when the stay at home orders were announced, the utility companies issued moratoriums on disconnections and our operations all shifted to doing intake over the phone or online."

Dotson said that the agency staff was glad to help their neighbors in need, especially during such a difficult time for everyone, but that it has been a challenge.

"It's tough to properly screen applicants and collect required documents through an online or over the phone intake appointment and so many of our clients lack the technology needed to make those options work well," said Dotson. "But we're grateful that we were able to extend the season to help more people and to do so in a safe manner."

HEAP is a federally funded program designed to help eligible low-income Ohioans meet the high costs of home heating. This program can only be accessed one time per season and the amount of the benefit depends on the size of the household, household income and what type of fuel is used. In most cases, the one-time benefit will be a credit applied directly to an energy bill. The HEAP Winter Crisis Program is also available on a once per season basis for customers who have been disconnected or received a shut-off notice, or who have less than a 10-day supply of bulk fuel.

While the Winter Crisis Program has ended for the season, Lifeline's Energy Assistance Office still provides assistance enrolling Lake County residents on the PIPP Plus plan.

Ohioans also have the option of enrolling in a longer-term plan, PIPP Plus, which allows them to pay a percentage of their income rather than high bills they cannot afford. Under PIPP Plus, customers pay 6 percent of their monthly income or \$10 a month, whichever is greater, to both electric and gas utilities. Customers in all-electric homes pay 10 percent or \$10, whichever is greater. This stays the same for 12 months and then income is rechecked. The key to this program is keeping up with on-time payments, said Rivera.

“For each on-time and full monthly payment, PIPP Plus customers see a credit on their bills for their current balances and a credit toward their accumulated arrearage,” said Marina Rivera, HEAP Program Manager at Lifeline. “PIPP Plus helps customers eliminate old utility debt and avoid new utility debt.”

To be eligible for PIPP Plus, customers must have a household income at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty line and be a customer of a regulated gas or electric company. Any adult household member reporting zero income may be asked to provide tax documentation as verification. The program is administered by the Ohio Development Services Agency and the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio.

Lifeline will also be accepting and processing HEAP Applications for the one-time heating credit through June 1. The HEAP Summer Crisis Program is scheduled to begin on July 1. Throughout this summer, all HEAP intake will be allowable over the phone or online.

“Customers having a hard time paying on gas and electric should contact our office,” said Rivera. “We can see if they’re eligible for PIPP, CEI fuel funds and if they haven’t applied for HEAP, they have until June 1 to do so. If we’re not able to help through one of the various HEAP programs, we will always direct our customers to call the 2-1-1 hotline to see what other programs are out there to assist.”

To learn more about these programs, contact Lifeline, Inc.’s Energy Assistance Office at (440) 350-9160. Lifeline’s Energy Assistance Office is currently located at 54 S. State Street, Suite 303 in Painesville, however will be moving to a new location in June 2020 at One Victoria Place Suite 265A in Painesville.

Lifeline for the Empowerment and Development of Consumers was founded in 1973 with the mission of helping Lake County residents by providing them assistance and life skills programming that is designed to increase self-sufficiency. In 1980 Lifeline became a participating agency of the United Way of Lake County, UWLC, and in 1987 was designated a community action agency by the Ohio Development Services Agency, ODSA. In 2008, Lifeline was designated as a mental health agency by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Today Lifeline continues with the same mission of helping Lake County’s low-income residents break the cycle of poverty and make the transition from agency-dependency to self-sufficiency. Lifeline’s current programming includes services in the healthcare, housing & energy assistance, information & referral services and consumer education & job training areas. Our motto is ‘helping people, changing lives.’ Lifeline is currently funded by the UWLC and by grants through the ODSA, the Lake County Board of Commissioners, the Lake County ADAMHS Board, Lake County Department of Job & Family Services, the City of Mentor, the Western Reserve Junior Service League, the Lake County Board of Developmental Disabilities, Lake Health and through private donors.