



News Release

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Home Energy Assistance Program Winter Crisis Program Concludes April 19, 2021

PAINESVILLE, Ohio— The HEAP Winter Crisis Program (WCP), which began on November 1, 2020 and ran through March 31, 2021 served a high number of low-income households with emergency utility assistance.

Throughout the five months of the Winter Crisis Season, Lifeline's staff completed applications for 678 households from nearly every community in Lake County for emergency utility assistance. Of those 678 applications, 504 of them were approved for emergency utility assistance with either their gas or electric or the purchase of fuel oil. Over \$130,000 in federal dollars was expended over the course of the season. This is significantly less than last year's winter, likely due to the COVID-19 moratoriums on utility disconnections offered by many of the local utility vendors.

"It was definitely a different kind of season," said Carrie Dotson, Executive Director at Lifeline. "This was our first winter season where no walk-in assistance was offered and our intake appointments were primarily over the phone. It was a quieter season, for sure."

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. We're glad things opened up enough that clients could come to our office to drop documents off," said Dotson. "We know that some of the local utility companies still have their moratoriums in place, so that definitely attributed to our lower numbers this year."

The Winter Crisis Program assists low-income households that have been disconnected (or have a pending disconnection notice), need to establish new service, need to pay to transfer service, have 25% (or less) of bulk fuel supply remaining, or have a household member who was diagnosed with COVID-19 in 2020 to help stay warm this winter.

While the Winter Crisis Program has ended for the season, 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 Marina Rivera, Energy Programs Manager at Lifeline.

"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," Rivera said. "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 will 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.

“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.”

For more information about local energy assistance programs, contact Lifeline’s Energy Assistance Office at 440-350-9160 or visit our website at www.lclifeline.org. Lifeline’s office re-located in June 2020 and is now located at One Victoria Place, Suite 265A in Painesville. Additional information can also be found at www.energyhelp.ohio.gov or by calling (800) 282-0880.

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. Lifeline received interim designation as Geauga County’s community action agency in 2020.

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.