

Help available for seniors to heat homes this winter

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By MARGARET GIBBONS

The Reporter

NORRISTOWN - Eligible Montgomery County seniors and the disabled this winter will have another option to turn to if they need emergency help in heating their homes.

The Montgomery County Office of Aging and Adult Services has entered into a partnership with the Montgomery County Foundation and the United Fund of Southeastern Pennsylvania to create an emergency fuel fund this winter for needy seniors.

"We get dozens of calls every winter as people begin to make critical choices as to whether to pay for their prescriptions, food, homes or their oil bills," said AAS Director Joanne Kline.

Kline said she expects these calls to skyrocket this winter, with the cost of heating homes with oil predicted to increase by about 30 percent while the fuel bills of those homes heated with gas are expected to climb about 19 percent.

"Knowing we can't do it alone in government, we are reaching out to other partners," said Kline.

One of those partners is the Montgomery County Foundation, a non-profit community organization whose purpose is to link potential donors with charitable causes and charitable organizations that can best put those contributions to good use.

"This program is critical," said Virginia Franz, who oversees the Foundation. "It will address some dire needs."

The three agencies already have put together about \$30,000 for the fund and are hoping the public also will contribute.

People wanting to make contributions should make their checks payable to The Montgomery County Foundation Inc./Emergency Heating and Cooling Fund. The contributions can be sent to the Foundation at 2 West Lafayette St., Suite 120, Norristown, PA 19401.

For additional information on making a contribution contact the foundation at (610) 313-9836.

Kline, who said the partnership hopes to raise sufficient contributions to enable the fund to operate a similar emergency cooling program in the summer, said one of her agency's clients from Harleysville left 3 percent of an estate to the agency. AAS, which could realize as much as \$20,000 from the estate sometime next year when it is settled, intends to earmark those funds for the program, according to Kline.

This new fund will only be used for emergencies and will involve just one-time payments, emphasized Kline, adding that the fund will only be used when all other programs cannot resolve a true emergency.

All those applying for emergency assistance will be screened by an AAS caseworker, who will determine the applicant's eligibility as well as explore any other options the individual might have, according to the county.

An applicant may qualify for LIHEAP (Low Income Heat and Energy Assistance Program), according to Kline.

The AAS will use income criteria to determine an applicant's eligibility for the emergency funding.

A one-person household cannot have yearly income in excess of \$15,600 while a two-person household cannot have a combined income that exceeds \$21,000, according to Kline.

AAS will begin taking calls about the program and screening applicants after Nov. 3. Those applying to the program should call the AAS office at (610) 278-3601.