



## Heating aid programs see mixed demand

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February 18, 2012 2:00 AM

YORK, Maine — Demand for heating oil assistance from the Warm Hearts Warm Homes program is down 15 percent from last year, but it's unclear whether the drop can be attributed to a mild winter or a variety in avenues of assistance.

Warm Hearts Warm Homes is a heating assistance program run by the York Community Service Association.

According to program Director Lorna Ryan, Warm Hearts Warm Homes assisted 20 families in January this year, down from 27 families in January last year.

"I think the mild winter has affected that number a little, but it's tough to pin it to that alone," Ryan said.

Ryan cited other avenues of heating assistance, with people turning to the county and town offices for help, as a possible reason for the drop in demand.

At the county level, demand for heating oil assistance has increased.

In an e-mail, Brad Bohon, communications director for York County Community Action, reported "a sizeable increase in the number of applicants for home heating assistance (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) this year over last."

As of Valentine's Day, the YCCA had taken 5,556 applications for LIHEAP assistance; of those, 3,880 had been paid, with an average benefit of \$490, Bohon said. At the same time last year, YCCA had received 4,418 LIHEAP applications, of which 3,012 had been paid. The average benefit amount as of Valentine's Day 2011 was \$789.

"While the weather has been mild overall, the need for heating assistance has been strong," Bohon said.

According to the National Climatic Data Center, this past January was the fourth warmest on record for the United States. Maine experienced its eighth warmest January on record, according to the National Weather Service in Gray. As a result, natural gas prices have dropped dramatically. The U.S. Energy Administration reported natural gas prices at \$16.79 per gallon last Thursday, up slightly from a 10-year low of \$15.77 per gallon last month.

In Kittery, funds for Fuel and More, a fuel assistance program funded by private donations, have run out. According to Town Clerk Maryann Place, the program raised \$37,000 this year, and the entire amount

has been distributed to 137 families. Last year, the program served 165 families. "Heating oil prices are up this year, so we ran out of funds," Place said.

Heating oil prices are at \$4.03 per gallon, \$0.44 higher than they were this time last year, according to the U.S. Energy administration.

Along with Warm Hearts Warm Homes, the York Community Service Association also provides emergency funds for rent, utilities, dental care, medical care and car repair, as well as food vouchers, clothing assistance and camper scholarships. Ryan said that, while demand for heating assistance is down, demand for these other services is up.

The YCSA has been offering firewood assistance for the last two years. The York Water District donates cut and split logs harvested from their clearing sites. So far this year, 10 families have received a cord of wood from the service.

"That's kind of a neat thing, because most heating oil providers don't also provide wood for those who might need it," Ryan said.

York Community Service Association relies solely on private donations from schools, businesses, churches, and individuals for its funding.

The thrift shop at 1320 Route 1 is the YCSA's primary source of income.

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