

Community Action

The “Crisis” in Crisis Fuel

Please be aware that there are over 100 households as of January 15, 2014 who have utilized the maximum Seasonal, Crisis and Warmth benefit. Over 300 household have used their maximum Seasonal and Crisis benefits. These numbers are increasing on a daily basis. It is mid-January with a long winter to go and it has been exceptionally cold.

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Average Seasonal Benefit	\$900	\$900	\$787
Crisis Benefit – Statewide	\$3,980,855	\$3,613,989	\$2,500,000
Number of gallons of fuel available for a Crisis Assist			125 gallons
Number of Crisis Assists	3	3	1
Maximum WARMTH Assist	\$225	\$225	\$225

As you know, for the past three years Federal LIHEAP funding has decreased dramatically. Each year the State of Vermont has stepped up to ensure that a measure of the loss in LIHEAP funding was filled, yet there is still a reduction in the average seasonal benefit that helps Vermonters heat their homes.

In addition to the reduction in the LIHEAP benefit and the unprecedented cold weather this season, the Legislature changed the policy and reduced the budget of the Crisis Fuel Program last year.

There are three ways that an eligible Vermonter can receive assistance: 1) The seasonal LIHEAP benefit that is sent out at the beginning of the heating season. Last year the average seasonal benefit was \$900. This year the average benefit is \$787. 2) The Crisis Fuel benefit. For eligible households the maximum Crisis Assist is 125 gallons of fuel. In the past decade eligible families could receive up to 3 crisis assists. This year an eligible household can only receive 1 assist. 3) WARMTH funding through donations, fundraising and a match from utilities. The maximum WARMTH assist is \$225.

Last heating season 10,560 Crisis Fuel Grants were given out. The average grant was \$342. In addition to this first grant, 6,666 households received a 2nd and for some a 3rd Crisis grant.

Although WARMTH funding has increased each year from private donations, foundations and fundraising due to the acknowledged need and the generosity of donors, it can not replace the \$1.5 million that was taken from the Crisis Fuel budget last year. In comparison to the reduction of \$1.5 million in the state budget, the WARMTH donations from the last three years have been \$240,481, \$305,150, and as of 12/31/13, \$246,082. The maximum benefit for the WARMTH program is \$225.

The vast majority of Vermont households that find themselves in danger of having no heat and that meet the eligibility criteria for Crisis Fuel benefits are now reduced to one assist (LIHEAP recipients). Unfortunately, this year has been extremely cold and we are already seeing too many households that have received their Seasonal LIHEAP benefit, their one and only Crisis benefit, and the maximum WARMTH benefit and are still in need of assistance and in danger of losing their heat.

Here are stories of just 4 folks (elderly, working and persons with disabilities) with whom we are currently working. There are many others throughout the state:

JU – 85 year old man in a wheelchair. He received a small Seasonal Fuel benefit. It was delayed, because his fuel company is no longer certified. We used his Warmth benefit for an early propane delivery. He eventually got his Seasonal Fuel benefit in December. That was used by early January. We used his one Crisis Fuel assist in early January. He is low again. He recently fell at home. He has been in Burlington Health and Rehab. He cannot be released until he has fuel.

NK – 78 year old woman. She lives alone. She received the early Seasonal Fuel benefit. She used her Crisis Fuel benefit in early January. We used her Warmth assist to get her a small delivery from her very kind dealer. She has been in rehab for a few weeks due to a fall on the ice.... She will be ready to be released in a few weeks, but not if she can't get some fuel to warm her home.

EL – He is a working middle age man. His wife has been in FAHC due to cancer treatments. She will not be released until they have heating fuel. They have used Seasonal Fuel, Crisis Fuel and Warmth.

ZN – 48 year old man with significant disability causing him to have very high electric charges. His primary heating source is Natural Gas. His Seasonal Fuel benefit went to Vermont Gas Systems. We used Crisis Fuel for his electric. We have maxed out his Crisis Fuel with one assist to GMP. Even with the GMP Discount program, his electric bill is very high.

Again, our great concern is for these folks and many others that have received their maximum seasonal, crisis and warmth benefits. It is not yet the end of January with a long winter to go and presently very cold.

Recommended Plan to Address Crisis Situations

To set up a "Special" Fund that would allow for additional assistance for those in need:

- Households who have used the maximum benefits for Seasonal, Crisis and “utility” Warmth funding (only one crisis assist currently allowed).
- Households who have not received seasonal fuel and who are attempting to get expedited seasonal benefits but can't be approved in time to prevent them from being out of fuel.

Expected expense: \$500,000

Process:

- The special funds are distributed by existing formula with the flexibility to assist those in dire situations due to the present subzero temperatures and where current funding does not exist or allow them to be helped.
- Households are income eligible to 200% of FPL
- Documentation following Crisis standards
- Authority to determine eligibility residing with CAP Agencies