

Consumer Alert

Assistance Programs for Seniors Which Aide in Addressing Home Energy Costs

The Office of People's Counsel (OPC) is committed to increasing awareness for seniors regarding information that addresses resources for home energy costs. OPC often encounters seniors who have not been aware or have not taken advantage of programs that could significantly assist in the reduction and payment of their energy bills on a yearly basis. Direct and indirect resources are available to aid in the payment of home energy needs. Direct resources include benefits that directly contribute towards energy costs. Indirect resources include financial assistance that provides funds directly to individuals that may be used to offset or contribute towards energy bills.

Direct Assistance

Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) – OHEP provides assistance towards home energy bills for applicants with income up to 175% of the federal poverty levels. **For information and locations of local OHEP offices call 1-800-352-1446.** The program includes:

Maryland Energy Assistance Program (MEAP)

- ❖ Offers funds for gas, oil, electricity and other home heating and cooling bills.
- ❖ MEAP grants are based upon an applicant's income and type of fuel use.
- ❖ MEAP Funds are provided through the Federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Electric Universal Service Program (EUSP)

- ❖ Offers Bill Assistance with current electric bills and Arrearage Assistance up to \$2000.00, once every seven years, beginning as of July 1, 2009, for past due electric bills.
- ❖ EUSP is funded by a surcharge on Maryland electric customers' bills.
- ❖ To obtain EUSP the utility account must be in the name of the applicant and the applicant must agree to accept participation in the Utility Service Protection Program (USPP). USPP requires participants to be enrolled in budget billing and also protects participants from paying security deposits as well as reconnection fees if services are terminated.

Private Charities - Various sources of charitable assistance exist throughout the State of Maryland. OPC offers Resource Guides that provide valuable information regarding local, state, federal as well as non-profit financial and program assistance for Maryland's residential consumers with utility issues. The Guides provide information for each Maryland county as well as Baltimore City, and are organized by program or agency.

Fuel Funds - Maryland Fuel Funds operate primarily as utility funded non-profits with some charitable contributions provided through fund raising efforts. In general, Fuel Funds require that applicants have pending termination notices, that they be eligible for MEAP and that they be the last stop for financial assistance as the Funds provide matching credits for donations made to an applicant by non-governmental funding sources. In some cases Fuel Funds will provide assistance for those whose incomes are higher than the OHEP income requirements. Your utility company can provide contact information regarding the Fuel Fund in your area. In the Baltimore Metro area, the Fuel Fund of Central Maryland can also offer information regarding local Fuel Funds in the Baltimore Gas and Electric (BGE) territory. **For example, in the BGE territory the Baltimore Community Foundation (BCF) may provide up to \$500.00 for individuals with utility emergencies if Fuel Fund monies are also accessed.**

Weather Assistance Program (WAP) - WAP provides home weatherization services to limited income households (200% of poverty and below) through the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). WAP's services attempt to reduce energy costs for low income households, prioritizing the elderly, people with disabilities, families with children, high energy users and energy burdened users by improving the energy efficiency of their homes while ensuring their health and safety.

WAP is implemented through local agencies in Maryland and provides energy efficiency measures such as energy audits, air sealing, insulation, low flow shower heads and compact florescent light bulbs. There may be **additional funds available for furnace repair and replacement**. Installation of weatherization services may save households 30% or more depending upon the extent of services provided. WAP requires owner occupants to prove home ownership information. Renters may obtain WAP's services after obtaining written permission from their landlords to weatherize their rental units. Multi family rental units may be eligible for WAP if 66% of the unit's residents meet income eligibility standards. **Households may apply for WAP as part of their application for energy assistance with the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP). For information and locations of local WAP offices call 800-638-7781.**

Indirect Assistance

Maryland Access Point (MAP) – MAP is a gateway for information and assistance for seniors, persons with disabilities as well as their family members and other caregivers who need to plan for future needs. Information, assistance and future planning through MAP is available to individuals of all income levels in need of services to assist with remaining in the community and leading independent lives. Examples of program information available from MAP include housing, transportation, energy assistance,

Medicare and health insurance, financial assistance with prescriptions, tax credits (homeowner, renters and earned income), and employment resources. **For more information contact the Maryland Department of Aging at 1-800-243-3425.**

Food Stamps – Limited income individuals may receive additional financial assistance from Food Stamps based upon increases on utility bills. Food Stamp eligibility is based on “countable income.” Countable income is reduced if shelter expenses, which include utilities (including telephone), and rent/mortgage are greater than 50% of total household income. **Every three dollars in income reduction yields two dollars in food stamps benefits; therefore, you may become eligible for food stamp benefits based upon increases in energy bills.** Be sure that increases in energy, water and telephone bills are taken into account in the food stamp review process. Contact your local Department of Social Services regarding Food Stamp eligibility.

Flex Funds to Vulnerable Adults – Flex Funds are provided to all local Departments of Social Services in the State to provide assistance to individuals, especially seniors, who are having difficulty maintaining basic needs due to an emergency or illness. Covered emergencies are determined by the situation and the grant amount varies based upon need. Under extreme circumstances consideration may be given for an applicant to receive more than one Flex Fund in a 12 month period for additional emergencies. OPC has routinely sought Flex Funds for purposes of assisting seniors with utility emergencies. **These funds may be of critical importance in that they are eligible for matching credits from Fuel Funds. For example a \$500.00 Flex Fund grant could be matched with \$250.00 in Fuel Fund matching credits.** Contact your local Department of Social Services regarding eligibility for Flex Funds.

Qualified Medicare Beneficiary (QMB) will pay the premiums, deductibles and co-insurance payments of the Medicare Program for older and disabled individuals who are financially eligible. The current QMB eligibility caps for 2008 are: \$867/month income and \$4,000 in assets for an individual; and \$1,167/ month income and \$6,000 in assets for a couple. QMB-eligible beneficiaries must go to medical care providers who participate in the Medical Assistance Program. In addition to the income and assets stated, an individual or couple may have a house, car, and a burial plan (with a value not to exceed \$1,500) and still be eligible for the QMB Program. Applications are made for the QMB Program through the local Department of Social Services, using the standard Medical Assistance form. QMB recipients receive a gray card as evidence of their eligibility.

Special Low Income Medicare Beneficiary Program (SLMB) – SLMB will pay the Medicare Part B premium (\$96.40 per month in 2008) for people whose incomes are slightly more than the QMB criteria. The 2008 SLMB I eligibility guidelines are: \$868 - \$1,040 monthly income and \$4,000 in assets for an individual, and \$1,168 - \$1,400 monthly income and \$6,000 in assets for a couple. The 2008 SLMB II eligibility guidelines are: \$1,041 - \$1,170 monthly income and \$4,000 in assets for an individual, and \$1,401 - \$1,575 monthly income and \$6,000 in assets for a couple. As with the QMB Program, an individual or couple may hold certain assets (house, car, burial fund, etc.) that may be exempt from consideration. Applications are made for the SLMB

Program through the local Departments of Social Services, using the standard Medical Assistance form.

QMB and SLMB may also be sources of assistance for participants to address their utility bills through the savings realized as a result of Medicare premiums being paid. Contact your local Department of Social Services or Maryland Department of Aging MAP Services at 1-800-243-4525.

Department Of Aging Caregiver Grant – Local Departments on Aging provide monies for emergencies, including utility emergencies, through Caregiver Funds. Caregiver assistance is available to seniors ages 60 and over as local funds is available. Some local Aging offices provide benefits up to \$500.00. Caregiver grants are eligible for Fuel Fund matching credits. For more information regarding availability of the Caregiver grant contact **The State Department of Aging at (410) 767-1100, or Toll free, Maryland at 1-800-243-3425.**

Tax Credits

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) - The EITC provides a refundable tax credit with an average refund of approximately \$2,000.00 and a three year retro-active refund application. If you qualify for the federal EITC, applicants may be entitled to a Maryland EITC on state tax returns equal to 50% of the federal EITC, as well as a local earned income tax credit. Individuals may be eligible for an EITC even if no taxes are owed; however, a tax return must be filed. The EITC is an important resource for addressing past due utility bills and can often be timed for receipt when large past due winter utility bills are presented. **For questions regarding EITC call 1-800-829-1020.** Maryland also provides a State Tax Credit. **For information regarding the Maryland State Tax Credit call (410) 260-7980. AARP provides free tax services for the elderly and disabled call 1-888-227-7669.**

The Renter's Tax Credit (RTC) – The State of Maryland offers a tax credit to limited income renters. Eligible renters include limited income persons who are (1) under age 60, have at least one dependant under age 18 and comply with gross income limit guidelines or (2) 100% disabled and comply with gross income limit guidelines. All renters age 60 and over who comply with gross income limit guidelines are eligible. The application and documents must be received by September 1st of each year. **For information regarding the RTC contact (410) 767-4433 or 1-800-944-7403.**

The Homeowner's Property Tax Credit - This Maryland tax credit is available to Maryland homeowners whose property taxes exceed a fixed percentage of their incomes. The program is available to qualified homeowners regardless of age. The application and documents must be received by September 1 of each year. **For information regarding this credit contact (410) 767-5758.**