

The Bay State Banner

Boston Banner

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Heating subsidies available for Mass residents in need

By Melissa Fuller

Shamika Gumes lives with her two children in a Dorchester apartment shadowed by trees and a nearby church. The rooms never feel the warmth of direct sunlight. Even in spring, she runs the gas furnace to keep out the chill.

Gumes, a nursing assistant, has lived in the three-story Welles Avenue home with her son Thai, 11, and daughter Sanaiya, 6, for the last five years. Every winter is a struggle. When the oil burner stopped working three years ago, she converted to gas heat and began receiving federal fuel assistance through Action for Boston Community Development Inc. (ABCD), the largest human services agency in New England.

But with winter gas bills averaging close to \$500 a month, costs just keep climbing out of Gumes' reach. Covering other pressing expenses like food, utilities and transportation means she can only pay a portion of her gas bill during the winter, leaving the rest to get paid off through the hot summer months.

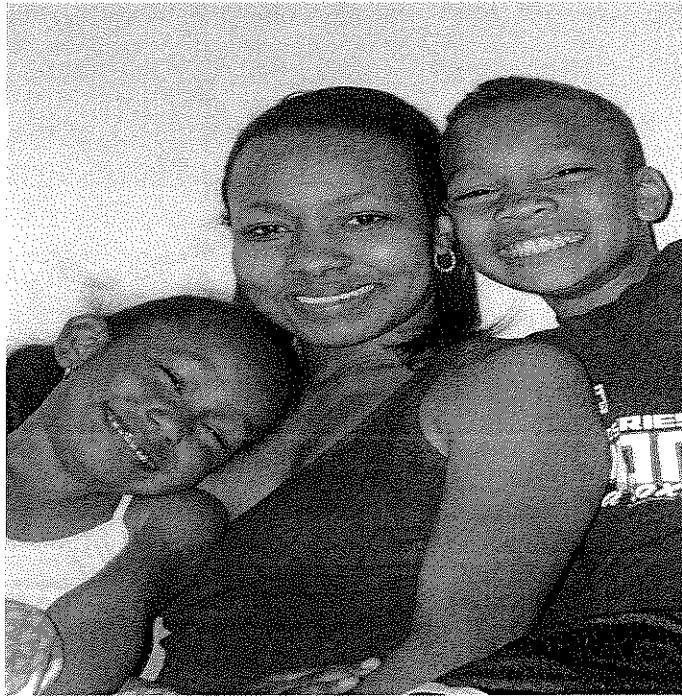
This winter, a delay in Gumes' application to ABCD forced her to turn to another fuel assistance initiative for help — the Citizens Energy/Distrigas Heating Assistance Program (CEDHAP), which provides a subsidy of \$150 to income-eligible households that heat their homes with natural gas.

“CEDHAP's help will come in handy because at the end of the winter and during the summer, while I'm playing catch-up with my gas bill, I'll have someone to turn to,” says Gumes. “I honestly can't keep up when the winter months are here, so any little bit helps.”

Citizens Energy Chairman Joseph P. Kennedy II and Distrigas Chairman Clay Harris announced the fifth year of the program at a seasonal launch event in March, held at the Lowell home of Sara Lavoie-Thiel. Like Gumes, Lavoie-Thiel is a single mother caring for two young children. As a spring rain fell on the streets of the old mill city, Kennedy offered his bright blue Citizens Energy jacket to her before she ran inside to get her own coat.

Lavoie-Thiel's family is one of about 6,700 families who will receive assistance from CEDHAP this year. Distrigas provides up to \$1 million each year to fund the gas program by donating a portion of the sales from each liquefied natural gas tanker coming to its Everett facility.

“My business has been operating in Massachusetts for almost 40 years,” said Harris. “Winters are always very difficult in this part of the world, and with all the snow this year on top of the



current economic situation, we understand the difficulty a lot of folks are suffering at this time, and we are pleased to be continuing this program.”

Kennedy, the former Massachusetts congressman, lauded Harris and Distrigas as a “good company that is concerned with the fact that good people like Sara are having a hard time paying their bills.”

“Every once in a while, as bad, as we hear corporate America behaves these days, a company stands up and does the right thing,” he added.

In the past four years, CEDHAP has provided assistance to about 19,000 families. Massachusetts residents apply by calling 866-427-9918 or getting a referral from their local community action agency to get a \$150 credit on their gas bill.

With unemployment rising, more families are expected to seek help this year. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Massachusetts jumped to 7.8 percent in March, up from 4.7 percent a year before.

Increasing energy costs are a particular problem for lower-income residents. While middle-class families spend about 5 percent of their income on energy, lower-income families often spend 20 percent or more, making it more difficult to afford other basic necessities.

“Programs like CEDHAP are really helpful and important, because in my community, most families are low-income,” said Gumes. “I actually think there should be more assistance out there, but until that issue is fixed, I know I can count on CEDHAP.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Melissa Fuller is an employee of Citizens Energy Corporation.