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CU sparks effort for covering heat bills

Project Share's mission to keep needy warm.

WES JOHNSON • NEWS-LEADER • DECEMBER 2, 2010

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City Utilities is working on a new marketing campaign that will encourage people -- and businesses -- to help the needy pay their winter heating bills.

WHOM TO CALL

Details about OACAC's energy assistance programs are available online at www.oacac-caa.org

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You might soon see advertisements for Project Share on CU buses, TV and in the newspaper.

"We've got a wonderful community here," said CU spokesman Joel Alexander. "We've just got to educate them on what Project Share is and how it helps their neighbors."

Money for Project Share comes from contributions CU customers make by adding a little extra to their monthly utility bill or through direct donations to the program.

CU sends that money to the Ozarks Area Community Action Corp., which manages Project Share and handles applications for utility assistance.

OACAC keeps an amount equal to 15 percent of the previous year's Project Share donations to pay for staff time and expenses involved in managing the program.

Last year, Project Share donations totaled \$82,058. Through October of this year, donations have totaled \$67,690 -- on track to be about the same as the previous year.

During a Project Share Steering Committee meeting Wednesday, Carl Rosenkranz, OACAC executive director, said about 3,000 CU customers a month typically contribute to Project Share.

"But the CU customer base is more than 25 times

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that," he said.

He hopes the new campaign will encourage more people to round up the dollar amounts on their CU

bills or donate directly to the program.

"We're not going to force anyone to contribute," he said. "But we do want to encourage more participation, especially from corporations who traditionally haven't contributed to Project Share."

Project Share funds are used to assist CU customers who meet certain low-income guidelines.

Project Share money helps fill the gaps after federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and Energy Crisis Intervention Program funds run out.

During the 2010 winter heating assistance period -- from January through March, OACAC used Project Share money to help 960 CU customers with their heating bills.

There's a \$300 limit per family during the heating season, according to OACAC.

Rosenkranz said the amount of federal energy assistance money won't be known until February.

But he hopes the new Project Share marketing campaign will generate more contributions so there will be enough money available to make up for any shortfall.

If this year's winter is colder than usual, the need for assistance will also be greater than usual, he said.

If OACAC ends the heating season with more Project Share money than it needs, the money can be rolled over to the following year.

Rosenkranz said people who make less than 125 percent of the federal poverty level -- about \$25,000 for a family of four -- can qualify for energy assistance.

Occasionally, OACAC is able to help families who are just above the limit but are facing a utility bill crisis, he said.

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