

Fuel Assistance Programs

A consumer tip sheet



*A Publication of the
Massachusetts
Department of Energy Resources
Executive Office of Energy and
Environmental Affairs
Commonwealth of Massachusetts*

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Commonwealth of Massachusetts Programs

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) through their Community Services Division oversees a number of energy assistance programs. These programs are administered locally through **Non-Profit Agencies**. To find the **Non-Profit Agency** closest to you, call the DHCD Heat Hotline at 1-800-632-8175 or visit www.mass.gov/dhcd and click on heating assistance. Specific programs offered are outlined below.

Heating Bill Assistance

The **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)** operates between November 1st and April 30th, offering financial assistance to residents whom are at or below 200% of the federal poverty income level. **LIHEAP** pays benefits based on household income. Local **Non-Profit Agencies** determine income eligibility. These agencies make direct payments on your behalf to your primary vendor (oil, propane, wood, coal, gas, or electric utility). Payments are made up to a maximum dollar amount for eligible households.

Please note: Eligibility for LIHEAP may also qualify customers for the Discount Rates from electric, gas and telephone utilities

Heating System Assistance

Heating Emergency Assistance Retrofit Task Weatherization Assistance Program (HEARTWAP). **HEARTWAP** provides heating system services to low-income households. The program operates year-round through local **Non-Profit Agencies**. Households with incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty income level are eligible for **HEARTWAP**. During the winter months, the program serves primarily as an emergency intervention service, providing low-income households with help for heating system problems. During the spring and summer months, **HEARTWAP** provides heating system maintenance services subject to the availability of funds.

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Weatherization Assistance

Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP). WAP assists low-income households in reducing their heating bills by providing full-scale home energy conservation services (also called weatherization). Households qualifying for LIHEAP or receiving Aid to Families with Children or Social Security Income are eligible for WAP. Due to limited funding, priority points are awarded to households with members who are elderly, handicapped, children under the age of seven, or Native Americans. Tenants (with landlord approval) and homeowners are eligible for weatherization. The program also operates year-round through local **Non-Profit** Agencies. Please note that eligibility for this program is 200% of the federal poverty level, LIHEAP is also 200%.

Other Energy Assistance Programs

The Salvation Army's Good Neighbor Energy Fund offers one-time grants for eligible utility consumers. Heating oil consumers are now eligible. Call 1-800-334-3047 for more information. In area code 413 call: 1-800-262-1320.

Citizens Energy allows families to purchase one-time deliveries of discount home heating oil; call 1-877-JOE-4OIL (1-877-563-4645), for more information.

Other Shopping Options

Even if you are not eligible for the programs described, you may still have options to reduce your heating costs or spread them out over the year.

For Oil Heat Customers

Oil Co-Ops: You may consider joining an oil cooperative (co-op). Co-ops often save their members money on their oil and other services, such as energy efficiency services. They may offer discounts to low-income customers. Many co-ops also offer discount membership fees for senior citizens.

MASS. ENERGY CONSUMERS ALLIANCE

1-800-287-3950

(Formerly Boston Oil Consumer Alliance)

Comfort Crafted Oil Buying Network

1-800-649-7473

Cane Self Reliance Corporation: 1-888-808-0120

Laconia Consortium: 1-781-862-1943

Pioneer Valley Heating Oil Cooperative

1-413-545-0865

(Administered by UMASS Community Services)

Center for Ecological Technology

1-413-445-4556

(For complaints or problems about fixed-price contracts or other heating oil issues, call the **Attorney General's Office at 617-727-8400**)

Budget Payment Plans: Some dealers offer payment plans, allowing you to pay your heating bill over time rather than at the time of delivery. Check with your dealer to see whether this option is available for you.

For Natural Gas and Electric Customers

The Department of Public Utilities approves Natural Gas and Electric rates.

Contact your utility to see if you qualify for the Discount Rate. Utility customers may also qualify for LIHEAP and other energy assistance programs offered by utilities.

Consumers can also check with their utility/distribution company to see whether they offer Level-Pay (or Budget) Billing. This option allows customers to pay the same amount each month. Each year your utility will reconcile your bill. Then you will receive a credit (if you overpaid) or a bill (if you underpaid) for the balance.



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Guide to Heating Assistance

Utility Shut-offs for Non-payment

Under certain circumstances, a heating utility is not allowed to shut off the heat, even for non-payment. **These circumstances are:**

- if **everyone** in the household is over 65;
- if the consumer can demonstrate to the company that he or she is unable to pay the bill, and that someone who lives in the home is seriously ill or is a child under the age of one.

To qualify, contact the utility company and explain the situation. The utility is likely to ask for a copy of the child's birth certificate or other pertinent information, such as written proof of illness from a physician and/or proof of inability to pay based upon income.

There is also a **winter moratorium** in place every year from November 15 to March 15. During those months, gas and electric companies cannot shut off service because of inability to pay. This moratorium **does not apply** however, if service was shut off for non-payment before November 15.

Payment Options

Consumers may seek help from the local fuel assistance office if they are having trouble paying utility bills. The consumer does not have to be unemployed to get help. In addition, utility companies can work out discount, budget and payment plans.

General Information about Heating Oil Contracts

There are two types of contracts available to home heating oil consumers: a "fixed price contract," and a "capped price contract." With a **fixed price**, the consumer locks into a set price, meaning he or she will **pay a certain price** per gallon for the entire season, even if the cost of home heating oil goes up or down. With a **capped price** contract, the oil company puts a maximum price or "cap" on the cost of oil during the season. So if the cost goes down, the consumer may pay less.

Before entering into a contract with a home heating oil company, ask questions.

- ✓ Know what the start and end dates for the contract are and what the cost per gallon is.
- ✓ Make sure to get all the details in writing and carefully read all of the terms before signing.
- ✓ Keep a copy of the contract and any other related paperwork, including any advertisements the company placed at the time of purchase.

If an oil dealer violates the terms of either agreement, the Attorney General's Office may be able to help.

Propane gas for heating and home use presents issues different than those encountered with other home energy sources. Propane is difficult to comparison shop and consumers must consider a variety of factors in order to determine whether they are getting the best value. In some cases, the propane dealer, not the consumer, owns the tank. This is especially relevant if you want to switch dealers.

Propane is also priced differently from oil or gas, and you may be charged a higher rate if you use very little fuel each year. Many propane dealers offer a balanced billing payment plan that allows you to spread out annual costs over many months, lowering the cost of seasonally higher bills. Remember to read all contract terms carefully, and inquire about all fees and charges.

For more information...

To report unfair and deceptive conduct or to apply for free mediation services:

Office of the Attorney General Consumer Protection Division

www.mass.gov/ago

(617) 727-8400 Consumer Complaint and Information Hotline

For heating assistance:

Cold Relief: Massachusetts Energy Assistance Programs Heat Line

www.mass.gov/dhcd/components/cs/Fuel

(800) 632-8175

Salvation Army Good Neighbor Energy Fund

www.usa.salvationarmy.org

(800) 334-3047

From area code 413: (800) 262-1320

For oil heat only:

Citizens Energy

www.citizensenergy.com

1 (877) 563-4645