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NIPSCO agrees to heat-aid program for 2009-10

IURC revision will not allow funds to pay for utility reconnection fees if power is cut off

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By Keith Benman - keith.benman@nwi.com, (219) 933-3326 | Posted: Tuesday, December 1, 2009
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A key winter heat-aid program in northern Indiana will continue this winter, as Hoosiers continue to line up in record numbers for help with heating bills.

NIPSCO has accepted state regulators' Nov. 19 revised order authorizing the reinstatement of the utility's Winter Warmth heating-aid program, which in the past provided grants of up to \$450 for heating bills and reconnection deposits to low- and middle-income customers, NIPSCO spokesman Nick Meyer said Monday.

Under the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission's order, NIPSCO would have to pay increased amounts to support the program -- but the grants could not be used to pay for reconnection deposits, Meyer said. The program disbursed \$25.4 million in aid grants in its first five years.

"NIPSCO recognizes the importance of this program to many struggling Hoosier families, so before accepting the changes to Winter Warmth, we wanted to be certain that the program would effectively provide assistance to those customers who need it most," NIPSCO CEO Eileen O'Neill Odum said.

"Although gas prices are projected to be significantly lower this winter, we anticipate an even greater need for assistance, especially given the current level of unemployment across our local communities and the continued effects of the economy on many of our customers."

Two other Indiana utilities, Vectren and Citizens Gas, announced Monday they would reinstate their heat-aid assistance programs, which also were covered by the IURC's order.

NIPSCO's accepting the IURC revisions to this season's Winter Warmth ruling comes as Hoosiers continue to line up in record numbers for heat aid, with 87,163 people receiving \$34.1 million so far from the federally funded Energy Assistance Program, according to figures from the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority.

Advocates for the poor and elderly were especially keen to get the Winter Warmth program going again, but expressed concern over whether customers could use it to pay the hefty deposits NIPSCO sometimes

charges to turn the utilities back on. Federal regulations prevent Energy Assistance Program grants from being used for reconnection deposits.

"Without that assistance, a lot of those people coming to us cannot get their utilities reconnected," said Jane Hopkins, who oversees energy assistance programs at Northwest Community Action. "We will see, as we did in previous years when bills went very high, households moving in together to stay warm."

All people qualifying for the Energy Assistance Program also are automatically enrolled in Community Action's weatherization and energy conservation program, Hopkins said. That program is being fueled by \$3.4 million in federal stimulus funds.

Northwest Community Action had hoped NIPSCO's Winter Warmth, which expired earlier this year, would be quickly restarted following the IURC's Nov. 19 order.

Winter Warmth is funded by a small surcharge on customers' bills and a contribution from NIPSCO. The IURC's Nov. 19 order increases the utilities' contribution to 25 percent of total heat aid program costs, from the 18 percent to 23 percent they contributed in previous years.

Energy Assistance Program applications are down slightly locally, but the first good cold snap could drive more people to apply at local agencies, Hopkins said.

Since Northwest Indiana agencies started taking applications eight weeks ago, 9,900 people have qualified for \$3.95 million in grants. That is down 6 percent from last year. But the figure so far this year is still 63 percent above the average in the five previous years.

Statewide, a record 197,652 Hoosiers qualified for \$85.8 million in Energy Assistance Program benefits in the 2008-09 heating season, according to the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority.

Households with incomes up to 150 percent of poverty level can qualify for the Energy Assistance Program. For example, a family of four with a yearly household income of \$33,075 would qualify for the program.

Home heat aid helps keep Hoosiers, Illinois residents warm

Homeowners and renters can apply for Energy Assistance Program grants at the following locations in Indiana and Illinois:

Gary Neighborhood Services

300 W. 21st Avenue, Gary

(219) 883-0431

Metro Corps of Gary, Inc.

839 Broadway, Gary

(219) 886-3155

United Neighborhood Organizations -M.L. King Center

4802 Melville Ave., East Chicago

(219) 378-9810

United Neighborhood Organizations - Bessie Owens Center

4001 Alexander Ave., East Chicago

(219) 391-8478

Love Center

4619 Melton Road (U.S. 20), Gary

(219) 938-8085

Lake Station Center

275 E. 29th Ave., Lake Station

(219) 963-0261

Greater Hammond Community Services

824 Hoffman, Hammond

(219) 932-4800

Porter County Community Services

1005 Campbell St., Valparaiso

(219) 464-9736

Ross Township Trustee Office

24 West 73rd Ave., Merrillville

(219) 769-2111

South Lake County Community Services Inc.

1450 E. Joliet, Suite 202, Crown Point

(219) 663-0627

Bloom-Rich Community Development Association ESC

1203 W. End Ave., Chicago Heights

(708) 754-4575

CEDA Center for Community Action ESC

53 E. 154th St., Harvey

(708) 339-3610

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