

# WAVERTON VALLEY TIMES

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## Utilities, groups working to keep people warm in tough times

High unemployment and a still-struggling economy have combined this winter to make it harder than ever for some people to stay warm.

And, because the number of those affected continues to grow, programs trying to help people with their energy bills have an even tougher job.

"Oregon and Washington families have been directly impacted by the recession, and unemployment is at an all-time high in our region," said Stephen Feltz, NW Natural controller and treasurer. "We hope our GAP (Gas Assistance Program) campaign will provide some relief for our customers struggling in these tough economic times."

NW Natural's Gas Assistance Program is an important initiative that helps low-income customers in Oregon and Southwest Washington keep the heat on. NW Natural shareholders cover all administrative fees so every single penny donated goes directly to the program.

From June through August 2009, demand for gas assistance has almost tripled to 271 (up from 92 calls during the same period in 2008), according to the United Way. These are based on 211info calls from people needing help specifically with gas payments. The 211info service is the region's social service information hub, available in the four-county area. Operators help people connect with local agencies that are distributing funds for gas bill payments.

"Last year, GAP provided just over \$200,000 to help more than 1,600 NW Natural customers in need of assistance," said Jenna Cooper-Gross, NW Natural spokeswoman. "This year, we are hoping to exceed that number, so we've issued a challenge to our communities in the form of a matching campaign."

### Give a little, give a lot

In an effort to really help those struggling customers, NW Natural has already contributed \$50,000 this year and will match up to \$25,000 more for a total of \$75,000. The donation comes out of the company's Corporate Philanthropy Fund. NW Natural hopes its customers and the general public will support this program as it is a key initiative the season.

"So many in our community have lost their jobs in the last year, so not being able to pay for a basic need is a reality," said Carolee Lee, vice president of communications, United Way of the Columbia-Willamette. "Funds donated to GAP stay in our area and are distributed through community action agencies in Oregon and Southwest Washington. People can feel good about truly helping their neighbors in need."

New this year, NW Natural has moved into Portland's "living room" at Pioneer Courthouse Square and has been hosting its GAP Warm Zone. The campaign kicked off on Black Friday (Nov. 27) and continues through this Saturday and Sunday. Downtown shoppers are invited to

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## GAP: 'We've got appointments clear into the end of January,' said Schilling

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stop by the Warm Zone and enjoy a warm fireplace and shelter from the weather while learning about the program.

Also new, honorary donations are an option for donors, so shop this holiday season with a cause. Making a donation in someone else's name is a great way to show you care—and donors will take away a GAP-branded ornament that has the friend or family member's name on it.

For those unable to visit the Warm Zone, donations can also be made online at [www.nwnatural.com/content/or](http://www.nwnatural.com/content/or) or [www.unitedway-pdx.org/GAP](http://www.unitedway-pdx.org/GAP).

### So much time and money

Judy Schilling, who has managed the energy and rent assistance program for Community Action

Organization of Washington County the past three years, has seen a big change in the kinds and numbers of people coming to her agency for help.

As unemployment has increased and more people have gotten into deeper financial trouble, the demand for service has only gotten harder to meet, she said.

"We have a certain number of workers taking applications, with so much time," said Schilling. "And we only have so much money."

Getting some face time at WCCAO is becoming more and more like getting in to see a dentist or doctor, she admitted.

"We've got appointments clear into the end of January," said Schilling.

"We're seeing bigger bills, and a lot more people are right on the verge of having their gas turned off."

And she knows that when people are in this kind of trouble paying their gas bill, there

is a raft of other problems swirling around that same household, probably involving rent or house payments, food, health care and other bills.

"When I do presentations about energy, I point out that it's not just about their energy bill," she said.

This growing pool of unemployed and desperate folks also means the very nature of the customer base is changing. Many of them are people who not so long ago could never imagine needing this kind of help.

"People have always kind of believed there was some kind of safety net out there," said Schilling.

### Already in pretty deep

And the fact that this economy has been down as long as it has also affects things, she said.

Energy and rent payments tend to run hand-in-hand, said Schilling, and by the time they get to WCCAO, they're already in pretty deep. In the case of rent, she added, "most of them are two or three months behind."

"People have been unemployed for so long now," said Schilling, pointing out that even in the best of times, her organization has trouble keeping up with the demand.

"Funding always kind of lags behind the need."

But it's not all doom and gloom, she insisted.

"When (customers) come in, most of my workers are able to do a full assessment and refer them to all sorts of other assistance they might be eligible for."

And they have good advice to offer. First of all, she said, "We encourage people to be patient and to realize it does take time to get through sometimes."

Once they do get to talk to the individuals calling, she said, they urge: "Try not get into a crisis mode . . . we encourage people to call the

utility and make partial payment, whatever they can do, until they can get in (to us) for help."

Washington County Community Action also offers classes on how to reduce bills and cut down on energy use, said Schilling.

And perhaps best of all, she said, "Our program is free."

The Community Action Agency Washington County's energy assistance numbers are 503-615-0772 (Beaverton) and 503-615-0771 (Hillsboro). Or send an e-mail to [energy@caowash.org](mailto:energy@caowash.org). The Web site is [communityaction4u.org](http://communityaction4u.org).