



News Release

New PSE Fund Extends Utility-Bill Relief to Thousands More Customers; More Than Twice as Many Low-Income Households Now Able to Get Assistance

BELLEUVUE, Wash--(BUSINESS WIRE)--March 4, 2003--Although the federal government has provided home-heating assistance to low-income people since the 1970s, only a small share of those who qualify receives any help before the fund runs dry each year. In Puget Sound Energy's sprawling 11-county service territory, only about 1 of 9 eligible households gets the federal aid.

That problem should ease, however, because of a new PSE program that earmarks substantially more energy assistance to the utility's residential customers needing help.

Puget Sound Energy's new "HELP" program will extend approximately \$6.7 million each year in utility-bill credits to needy electricity and natural-gas customers. The HELP fund more than doubles the amount of utility-bill relief currently available to PSE customers. As a result, approximately 20,000 more residences can get help in paying their PSE bills.

"Puget's program will make heating and lighting a home less costly for a lot of working families, seniors, single parents, and disabled persons," said Will Graham, who oversees Washington's federal energy-assistance program within the state Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development. "It means that many more families won't have to choose between paying for heat and paying for rent, groceries, medicine, and other basic needs."

The HELP program not only will more than double the number of PSE customers able to get utility-bill assistance, but it makes the aid available year-round. Federal assistance is provided only for wintertime heating costs.

"Because of the weak economy, community-action agencies are running out of federal assistance much earlier this year than in past years," said Dini Duclos, executive director of the Multi-Service Center in south King County. "So it's critical for us to get the word out to people that help remains available through the new Puget Sound Energy program."

The Multi-Service Center, together with about a dozen other local community-action agencies, helped to develop PSE's new program. These nonprofit agencies administer the program for PSE and process all customer applications for financial aid. (The agencies also administer the federal energy-assistance program.)

Depending on their income and energy costs, eligible customers can receive up to \$750 per year in electric- or gas-bill credits from the HELP fund. Eligibility is based on household income, with maximum earnings set (depending on the county) at either 125 percent or 150 percent of the federal poverty threshold. The HELP program's income limit for a family of four ranges between \$1,885 and \$2,263 per month.

A tiny portion of the natural-gas and electric rates that all PSE customers pay -- including low-income customers -- goes into the new HELP fund. A typical monthly PSE residential gas or electric bill directs about 30 cents into the program.

People wanting more information on the HELP program should contact the nearest energy-assistance office in their county (see the attached list) or call PSE at 888/225-5773.

(list of agencies that administer PSE's HELP program)

Where to go for HELP

Island County
The Opportunity Council
360/679-6577 or
800/317-5427

Jefferson County
Olympic Community Action Programs
360/385-2571

King County
Multi-Service Center (south-county residents)
253/874-4328 (Federal Way)
253/850-1338 (Kent)
Hopelink Energy Line (north- & east-county residents)
425/869-6027 or
800/348-7144
Central Area Motivation Program (Seattle residents)
206/328-2356

Kitsap County
Kitsap Community Resources

360/479-1507

Kittitas County

OIC of Washington

509/925-1448 (Ellensburg) or

509/674-2375 (Cle Elum)

Lewis & Thurston counties

Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason & Thurston Counties

360/736-1800 (Lewis) or

360/438-1100 (Thurston)

Pierce County

Dept. of Community Services (county residents)

253/798-3800

Metropolitan Development Council (Tacoma residents)

253/572-5557

Skagit County

Skagit Community Action Agency

360/428-1011 (Mount Vernon) or

360/853-8767 (Concrete)

Snohomish County

County Human Service Department

425/259-5185

Whatcom County

The Opportunity Council

360/734-5121 or

800/649-5121

CONTACT: Puget Sound Energy

Roger Thompson, 888/831-7250