

Weatherization program still providing service but funding is reduced

By Frances Borsodi Zajac fzajac@heraldstandard.com | Posted: Tuesday, October 15, 2013 2:30 am

The federal government shutdown is not affecting Fayette County's weatherization program yet because it is still working under a contract extension of the previous fiscal year.

However, prior to the shutdown, Congress significantly cut funding for the program's current fiscal year, which resulted in an elimination of six local jobs.

Al Jeffries is housing development director for the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, which operates the county's weatherization program. He explained Congress allocated the program \$223,600 from the U.S. Department of Energy for the past fiscal year (2012-13).

The allocation is providing funds for 33 jobs that include insulation, weatherstripping, air-sealing and furnace repair or replacement for local residents who meet income guidelines, which is 200 percent of poverty level.

The 2012-13 fiscal year ended Sept. 30, but the county program had already received an extension to continue using its funds until the end of December.

But Fayette County is still being affected by Congress. Last spring, county weatherization program officials learned that Congress reduced their funding to \$37,000 for the 2013-14 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1.

"It's a big cut," said Jeffries. "We were told several months ago. The shutdown is not affecting this allocation."

The funding cut resulted in the loss of six positions.

"Last year, we had 13 people and now we have seven, including office staff," Jeffries said.

He noted that Congress had increased weatherization funding under the federal economic stimulus program a few years ago, with the county receiving \$4.5 million between the start of fiscal year 2009-10 and December 2012.

"We helped close to 800 people," Jeffries said.

Pre-stimulus allocations were about \$300,000 for a fiscal year. The drop to \$37,000 is a great reduction, Jeffries said.

But Jeffries noted, “Fortunately, we have another source of income from LIHEAP. That’s energy assistance that comes through the Department of Welfare. We received \$550,000 for (fiscal year) 2012-13 and we anticipate that being the same this year, but it’s not known yet.”

The weatherization program receives LIHEAP (Low-Income Energy Assistance Program) funds that help people who don’t have heat but have a furnace in their homes. People who are eligible for the program must contact the local public assistance office, which then contacts the weatherization program to send out a furnace contractor.

“For a lot of people, it’s a difference between having and not having heat,” said Jeffries.

Jeffries said that any money that is left in LIHEAP after the crisis program ends can be used by the county for standard weatherization, but they do not yet know how much will be left.

Carrie Miller, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Welfare in Harrisburg, said the LIHEAP program will open on Nov. 4.

In regards to the federal shutdown, Miller said, “We are closely monitoring the situation.”

In addition, the Fayette County weatherization program also has contracts with Columbia Gas and West Penn Power for weatherization projects for eligible utility customers.

More information about the county weatherization program is available by calling the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority at 724-438-3377.



101513 weatherization 2.jpg

Weatherization work done to a home in Fayette County through the county's redevelopment authority.



101513 weatherization 1.jpg

A worker labors to make the doors and windows of a Fayette County mobile home more energy efficient through a program administered by the county's redevelopment authority.