

Nine years needed to address weatherization list

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HARRISBURG - About 1,100 Fayette County residents waiting for help reducing their home heating bills this winter will be left out in the cold, according to a state audit released Wednesday.

Fayette has the longest waiting list in the state for a weatherization assistance program administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

State Auditor Jack Wagner's office estimated it would take about nine years to help all of the roughly 1,100 Fayette residents who have applied for the program.

Fayette's backlog is nearly twice as long as the 560 people waiting for help in Philadelphia. And Philadelphia needs just five months to clear its backlog, according to Wagner's office.

"We may have global warming before we are able to serve all of the people in Fayette County," Wagner said during a Capitol press conference.

Action Housing Inc., which serves Greene, Washington and most of Allegheny counties, was the only agency that had no one on a waiting list, according to Wagner's office.

The weatherization program inspects homes and then pays for repairing heating systems, adding insulation, caulking windows, wrapping water heaters and other energy-saving improvements.

Wagner said his audit did not investigate why the huge backlog exists in Fayette.

Instead, the audit focused on the Community and Economic Development Department's poor management of the \$35 million weatherization program.

In Philadelphia, agencies wasted \$94,081 by weatherizing some homes twice, according to the audit.

Another \$8,791 was spent in York County on weatherization services for a person not eligible for the program, the audit found.

The audit recommended stricter oversight of local agencies and program contractors to make sure costs are appropriate and work is done properly.

Better cooperation with local agencies to make sure elderly and disabled homeowners and households with children receive help first is also needed, the audit stated.

During his press conference, Wagner said that about \$20 million in federal funding for the state's low-income heating assistance was unused in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2006.

Some of that money could be shifted to the weatherization program to shorten waiting lists, Wagner suggested.

"There's no reason why some counties should have a far larger backlog and not have the resources to address that backlog," Wagner said.

Al Jeffries, director of Fayette County Redevelopment Authority's weatherization program, said reducing the waiting list will require more funding.

Fayette receives about \$500,000 per year for weatherization programs and helps an average of 150 households annually, Jeffries said.

The authority helps elderly and disabled homeowners and households with children first, he said.

This year, the state also has asked the authority to make households with high energy use a priority.

The authority is currently helping homeowners who signed up in 2003, he said.

"We've always had a backlog," said Jeffries, who has worked in the weatherization program for 27 years. "A lot of the folks who are on the list by the time we get to them they will have moved."

Officials at the Department of Community and Economic Development released a prepared statement late Wednesday defending their oversight and disputing some of the audit's findings. Ken Klothen, the department's deputy secretary, said in the statement that a points system will be used this year to guarantee the neediest homeowners receive help first.

"DCED recognizes areas of improvement are needed, but believes that sound management practices are being used to correct them," Klothen said.

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