

SENIOR CONNECTION

Information for Seniors & Caregivers

Winter 2009: The Hibernation to Come

STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ROBERT DWYER, PH. D.

ALISE ARNOLD

JOHN BELDING

JUDY CROTEAU

JENNIFER FINI

PEGGY LANDS

EILEEN O'BRIEN

CATHY PICKERING

JANE WHEARLEY

CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

AGENCY ON AGING (CMAA)

360 WEST BOYLSTON ST.

WEST BOYLSTON MA 01583

CALL: VOICE/TDD

(508) 852-5539

(800) 244-3032

FAX: (508) 852-5425

E-MAIL US AT CMAAGING@

SENIORCONNECTION.ORG

WEB SITE:

WWW.SENIORCONNECTION.ORG

SUMMER/FALL 2008

Yes, I know its still warm and humid. We have yet to schedule the closing of the pool, the final harvest of the garden tomatoes, or the apple picking trek at the orchard. The fact is, however, that the price of gas and heating oil has still been



By Robert P. Dwyer, Ph.D.,
Executive Director

the topic of choice nearly every day in conversations that expose the fear and concern that we all have. And so I cannot imagine how people on fixed incomes, like so many of the seniors in the CMAA region, will balance their budgets around the costs of gas, heating their homes, and paying for groceries.

The upcoming winter of 2009 will be a horror show for elders. Advocates across the Commonwealth are mobilizing efforts to move legislators at both the federal and state levels for increased funding for home heating assistance. As of this writing, no action has yet been taken.

The question is: How bad is it going to be?

“New England is facing a financial Katrina,” said Al Norman, Executive Director of Mass Home Care. “It’s predictable---but it’s a disaster we can

avoid—if we take action now.” Mass Home Care wrote the Governor in early June asking for a summit on energy and food costs. The Governor recently announced he would do just that. The Governor also set aside \$20 million in a supplemental budget request for emergency energy aid, but Mass Home Care says that number needs to be \$50 million. A recent report by the State Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, chaired by Senator Marc R. Pacheco, agreed that Massachusetts needs to contribute at least \$50 million to the fuel aid fund.

Mass Home Care estimates that it will take \$250 million to keep heating assistance at the same level as last year--- which still left tens of thousands of families with empty oil tanks. More than 100,000 households fell behind on their utility bills, the group said. Federal fuel assistance for the coming winter heating season currently stands at only \$83 million, only 60% of the \$137 million the Commonwealth received last year. Yet fuel oil prices have doubled.

“At present, the \$83 million in federal fuel assistance funds for Massachusetts will provide a maximum benefit of \$503 for the poorest families in a program serving 150,000 low-income households,” said Joe Diamond, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Community Action Programs (MASS-CAP). “With heating oil predicted at \$5 a gallon or more, it will take \$1,375 to fill an oil tank. Families need about three tanks to get through the winter.

It's beyond scary."

Last year funding for home heating assistance in Massachusetts totaled \$137 million, with the federal government providing over \$120 million through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) plus \$15 million from the state. That combined funding translated into a maximum benefit of \$1,165 for households most in need.

"Heating oil prices have jumped 85% from this time last year," said Charlie Harak, Energy Attorney at the National Consumer Law Center. "And natural gas prices could easily be 20 percent higher this coming winter, leading to even more low-income families losing their utility service than last year."

Recent analysis done by the National Consumer Law Center shows that 125,000 low-income gas and electric customers are well over \$100 million in total arrears on their bills. NCLC estimates that utility terminations will increase 20% and more at most utilities over the summer, and that tens of thousands of residential utility customers will have their service terminated.

On July 16, 21 Northeast lawmakers sent a letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asking that Congress triple LIHEAP funding to \$9 billion and requesting an additional \$1 billion for weatherization programs to help homeowners conserve energy and save money. Last week four New England governors asked the federal government to increase heating assistance for New England to \$1 billion from \$252 million last year.

In a letter replying to Mass Home Care, Governor Patrick said, "Rising energy costs weigh heavily on all our minds right now, and I take your concerns very seriously." The Governor promised to have the Secretaries of Energy, Elder Affairs, and Health & Human Services contact Mass Home Care "to discuss the most effective ways we can deal with the very real concerns you outline in your letter."

Okay Governor, it's time to step up to the plate. It's the bottom of the 9th inning, two outs and bases loaded. How about a home run?

Have You Filed For Your Stimulus Payment?

What is This? and Why am I Entitled to it?

On February 14, 2008, President Bush signed the Economic Stimulus Package in hopes that a stimulus package would provide a "booster shot" for the economy. To receive a payment, taxpayers must have a valid Social Security number, \$3,000 of income and file a 2007 federal tax return. The IRS will take care of the rest.

According to the IRS, 5.2 million seniors and disabled veterans have not yet claimed their \$300 or \$600 economic stimulus payments. In the 61 Towns and Communities throughout Central Mass, there are still 14,274 unclaimed stimulus payments for seniors over 64 years of age. It is not too late to file a return to receive yours!

The IRS encourages you to file a return even if your income is low or much of your income is tax-free. If you qualify for a payment, you can ensure that you get it by filing your return by Oct. 15, 2008.

The IRS states, individuals who might not otherwise be required to file a 2007 tax return will need to file a return this year to receive the stimulus payment. The return must show at least \$3,000 in qualifying income.

In other words, low-income workers who had at least \$3,000 in earned income in 2007 but do not otherwise earn enough to be required to file a federal tax return need to file a return in order to get the stimulus payment.

Likewise, Social Security recipients, veterans and retired railroad workers who might not otherwise need to file a tax return must do so to receive the economic stimulus payment.

You can find out more information regarding the Stimulus Payment by going to the IRS website, <http://www.irs.gov/>, or call our Information and Referral, SeniorConnection, Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging at (508) 852-5539 or toll free in Mass (800) 244-3032, both V/TDD.

CMAA Welcomes New Assistant Planner



Alise Arnold has joined the staff of Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging as the new Assistant Planner. She recently received her Bachelor of Science in Human Services from Fitchburg State College. While studying at Fitchburg State College, Alise completed an internship with the United Way of North Central Massachusetts.

Alise currently resides in Fitchburg but will soon be moving to Millbury.

Louise Johnson has joined the Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging staff as a summer intern for Information and Referral Services, SeniorConnection. Louise is a graduate student at Lasell College in Newton where she is completing a master's degree in management. Her concentration is elder care administration. Prior to returning to school Louise worked in bank administration. She hopes her studies and internship with SeniorConnection will lead to a fulfilling new career.

Louise and her husband, Bob, reside in Boxboro, MA.

Summer Interns Work Up a Sweat for CMAA



Louise Johnson, Seth Robinson & Kari Viola

Seth Robinson joined the Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging staff as a summer intern for Information and Referral Services, SeniorConnection. Since joining CMAA, he and Intern Kari Viola have initiated contact with over 360 religious and civic groups in Central Mass regarding placement on the agency's new electronic newsletter mailing list. Seth has also researched ethnic demographics and made contacts with state and local agencies in an effort to improve access to CMAA programs for elders and caregivers with limited English proficiency, who constitute a traditionally underserved population.

Currently a sophomore at Wheaton College in Norton, MA, Seth is majoring in religion. He expects that the familiarity he has acquired with the inner workings of a human-services nonprofit will guide him as he discerns a calling to ordained ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Seth attended Leicester High School and is a lifelong resident of Leicester, MA.

Kari Viola is one of Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging staff summer interns for Information and Referral Services, SeniorConnection. She is participating in the Holy Cross Summer Internship Program, funded by the Lily Foundation. Her main projects, since joining CMAA, have been researching potential article topics for the website, as well as updating agencies and programs for the database.

Currently a student at the College of the Holy Cross, Kari is majoring in psychology, with a concentration in gerontology. She is a member and co-captain of the cross-country and track and field team.

Prior to her experience at CMAA, Kari's plans after college were to receive her masters in counseling and become a high school guidance counselor. However, after time spent at her internship, Kari's career plans might change to something more related to working with the elderly.



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Central Massachusetts
Agency on Aging
360 West Boylston Street
West Boylston MA 01583

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For Your Information

In our Spring Newsletter we addressed the fact that we would soon be sending out future issues of our newsletter through a new email program. We asked you to forward your email address if you prefer to have it sent this way. Starting in October we will begin communicating information to you using the new email program regarding RFP's, Alerts, Job Opportunities and of course, our Newsletter. If you want to be included in future informative emails, be sure to let us know your email address. If you do not have email or choose not to receive information in this format, we will continue to send you our newsletter through the postal mail, however all other communications will be sent via our new email program.

Annual Report Now Available

Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging is pleased to announce that our Annual Report for 2007 has been posted on our website at www.SeniorConnection.org and available for download. Just go to www.SeniorConnection.org and click on Publications and Brochures. You will see it in the list of publications. Click on Annual Report and it will display a copy that you may download.