

Walk for Warmth - Warming Hearts and Homes in Michigan



LANSING, Mich., Feb. 7, 2012 -- *CAAs, Utilities, Neighbors Join in Energy Assistance Fund Raisers* PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- In late February, when most Michiganders prefer to stay indoors, you might notice large groups of young and not so young walkers, traipsing through the streets of your community. Chances are they are taking part in a "Walk for Warmth" fundraiser, sponsored by their local Community Action Agency to raise money to help low income neighbors keep the heat and lights on through our cold, dark winters.

There are 30 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) in Michigan, operating in each of the 83 counties. Many sponsor a "Walk for Warmth" or similar fundraiser to support their mission of helping low income families achieve higher levels of economic self-sufficiency. When a household has to spend 25-35 percent of its monthly income for energy, compared to less than 10 percent in more affluent homes, other needs are likely to go unmet. Or they are simply unable to pay their bills, risking dangerous shutoffs and driving them deeper into debt.

The need for help is greater than ever. In recent months, Michigan has seen state and federal support for heating assistance programs wane like a weak winter sun. The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is slated for a 50% cut in FY 2012, and the state's Low Income Energy Efficiency Fund has been replaced by the Vulnerable Household Warmth Fund at 65% of former funding levels. In 2010, 1.2 million Michigan households were eligible for LIHEAP assistance and it's unlikely that number has gone down.

CAAs have long been centers where folks facing hard times could go to get help paying their utility bills and making their homes more energy efficient through the Weatherization Assistance Program and other resources. About 20 years ago, agencies began to supplement the funds they received from state and federal sources with their own fundraising events, eventually creating today's "Walk for Warmth." With drastic cuts being made to LIHEAP and our state assistance programs, private funds to address the need are more important than ever.

That's where events like "Walk for Warmth" come in. The concept is much like other efforts to raise money for worthy causes: "Race for the Cure" for breast cancer awareness, Easter Seals' "Walk with Me" to combat birth defects, are two examples. Participants collect pledges for donations upon completion of the walk or simply make a donation in their own names.

CAAs also enlist corporate sponsors in the effort, many of which contribute cash and in kind donations. Among the leading supporters have been the state's utility companies. DTE, Consumers Energy, and

others energy companies provide marketing support and employee volunteers. Working with its hometown CAA in Jackson, for example, Consumers Energy has vowed to match all employee and retiree contribution to any "Walk for Warmth" in the state.

The "Walks" themselves are designed to be fun and are combined with other activities to generate interest. EightCAP, the CAA serving Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella, and Montcalm counties adds a chili cook-off competition to spice up its event. Dickinson-Iron Community Services Agency in the UP offers up a Nordic twist with its cross-country themed "Ski for Warmth." Many agencies recruit local politicians and celebrities to participate—radio disc jockeys and television personalities are great at spreading the word and increasing awareness of the need for funding a vital program.

The number of participants and the amount of money raised by the "Walk for Warmth" events are impressive. Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency expects nearly 1500 residents and 30 sponsors to take part and to collect \$180,000 in cash and in kind contributions through its two "Walk" events this year. Collections in the area of \$50,000 are not uncommon even among the smaller CAAs. And, as each agency will tell you, the money raised stays in the community and is used only to pay utility bills or for deliverable fuels such as propane and fuel oil for neighbors in need. No "Walk for Warmth" money is used for administrative costs or other unrelated purposes.

Most "Walk for Warmth" events in Michigan are being held in February and March. A complete listing can be found at www.mcaaa.org/events page at MCAAA.org to find out who's holding a Walk in your area and contact your local CAA to find out how to get involved. Participating in a "Walk for Warmth" is like chopping your own firewood: you'll be warmed by it twice—once by the exercise and once more by the feeling in your heart when you've helped a neighbor in need.

Contact: Mike Shalley, +1-517-321-7500, mshalley@mcaaa.org

SOURCE Michigan Community Action Agency Association