

HILLSDALE

# DAILY NEWS

HELPING THE LESS FORTUNATE

## Customers contribute nearly \$125K for utility bills

By Don Reid

HILLSDALE — Since January 2009, Hillsdale Board of Public Utilities (HBPU) customers 'rounded up' bills to contribute \$124,437 to help those who could not afford to pay a utility bill to keep service on. HBPU Manager Rick Rose explained for those participating, bills are rounded up to the next dollar so from 1 to 99 cents a month is contributed to the program. This brings in around \$3,000 a month.

Maxine Vanlerberg, Hillsdale County director for Region II of the Community Action Agency, which administers the program, told the HBPU board the maximum amount given is \$300. The policy also limits payments to twice a year. 'It is not our policy or plan to pay bills on a regular basis but to help families toward self-sufficiency,' Vanlerberg explained.

The program director said in the last 18 months there has been a growing need for the fund and for an unexplained reason there was an increased need during the past summer when winter is usually the time when need is greatest. The program even helped four homeless by providing funds to pay off past due utility bills so the people could qualify and obtain new housing and connect utilities.

Usually the program pays 'the shut off amount' to keep utilities in service. Many of these 487 households who received assistance over the three years, eight months had events that got them behind on bills and needed one time help. Average payment per household was \$144.70 or \$78.88 per individual.

'Our best clients are the ones who don't come back,' Vanlerberg told the board. She explained those who do come back are counseled on budgeting and other services. Helped by the program were 1,536 family members of 848 adults and 688 children. Of these 321 families had income of less than 100 percent of the poverty level. This is \$1,921 a month for a family of four or \$23,050 a year. Michigan's median income for the same family is \$43,762. They cannot earn more than 200 per cent of the local poverty level.

Many individuals received only the minimum \$693 social security disability income. Of those who received help nearly 40 percent were employed but underemployed. Because of the \$300 limit those seeking help also received money from other groups such as the Salvation Army or state aid. In total those groups contributed around \$37,000 above Roundup.

Vanlerberg said the program is publicized mostly by word of mouth among services agencies and those who receive help.