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LOCAL

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JACKSON CITIZEN PATRIOT

PAYING ENERGY BILLS

Winter brings need for assistance

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More people seeking help with heat and utility bills

As the weather gets colder and the economy continues to struggle, local human services agencies expect to keep seeing a strong demand for heat and other utility assistance this winter.

Some organizations, such as the Community Action Agency, have seen an influx of people in need. The agency sees from 90 to 185 walk-in appointments each month specifically for utility assis-

tance and receives from 560 to 1,200 calls each month.

"We're definitely expecting to see as many (people) as we have in the past," said Jessie Murray, spokeswoman for the CAA, which serves residents in Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties. "It's a situation where there is a tremendous need."

Unemployment in Jackson County was 14.5 percent

in October. Many of the recently unemployed are facing joblessness for the first time and are not familiar with the available resources.

Some of the CAAs' main funding come from state and federal sources, such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and the Michigan Public Service Commission. Thousands of Jackson

County households have found relief through the Michigan Home Heating Credit program, which is funded by the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

About \$970,000 went to 7,034 Jackson County households — an average payment of \$137 — through the home-heating program between Oct. 1, 2007, and Sept. 30, 2008.

According to the state Department of Human Services, The Year before, about 6,300 households in Jackson County received about \$1.2 million in home-heating credits.

Eligibility for the home-heating credit is based on household income and number of exemptions. An alternative credit is based on heating costs. The Salvation Army in Jackson is booked with appointments for people who need help paying their electric and heating bills. The nonprofit receives about 10 to 15 calls a day from people who need utility assistance, said Maj. John I. Mallett.

The average payout is between \$300 to \$800, depending on the person's financial circumstances, he said.

"It's a difficult time for a lot of people," he said. "There's a lot of new people who have never been in the system before."