

Community partners gather to support access to winter heating assistance

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Colby O'Brien, Vice President of Programs for Making Opportunity Count, provides an overview of the Federal Fuel Assistance program with nonprofit and community leaders who participated in the recent 25th Annual Energy Assistance Forum, sponsored by Unitil and co-hosted by the United Way of North Central Massachusetts in partnership with Making Opportunity Count. (Unitil)

FITCHBURG — Unitil Corporation, a provider of gas and electricity to customers throughout New England, is encouraging Massachusetts customers to take advantage of a wide range of fuel assistance programs that will help reduce heating costs this winter.

That was the message shared earlier in November with nonprofit and community leaders who participated in the 25th Annual Energy Assistance Forum, sponsored by Unitil and co-hosted by the United Way of North Central Massachusetts in partnership with Making Opportunity Count.

The forum focused on equipping frontline nonprofit organizations with the tools and information they need to connect residents with critical programs that help manage heating costs and maintain safe, comfortable homes during the colder months. While the recent government shutdown has temporarily impacted some federal assistance funds, Unitil, the United Way, and local nonprofits

are working together to ensure residents continue to have access to vital heating resources this winter.

“We greatly appreciate the participation of our frontline partners in this annual meeting,” said Unitil’s External Affairs Manager Amanda Vicinanza. “These agencies play a crucial role in helping residents, especially seniors and those on fixed incomes, stay safe and warm this winter.”

Colby O’Brien, Vice President of Programs for Making Opportunity Count, provided an overview of the Federal Fuel Assistance program. This year, a family of four with a household income of \$99,573 or less qualifies for assistance. For a single person, the income figure is \$51,778. The one-time benefit hasn’t been finalized, but historically averages \$250 to \$600, depending on income and housing type. Applications opened on November 1, and residents can contact Making Opportunity Count in Fitchburg at (978) 342-4520 for more information.

Customers with heat pumps also have an opportunity for savings this winter. Unitil shared information on a new heat pump rate this winter that begins on Nov. 1. For the upcoming heating season, customers can see a 64% reduction in their electric distribution rate — about six cents per-kilowatt hour in savings — which could save households \$100 or more during peak heating periods.

Unitil Credit Manager Justin Stearns also highlighted the company’s budget billing program, which makes monthly utility bills more affordable by spreading energy costs evenly across the year, as well as income-based discounts providing 40% off electric bills and 25% off natural gas bills.

Unitil also offers an Arrearage Management Program, which provides eligible customers up to \$4,800 in relief per service, per year on their outstanding balances. In addition, the Good Neighbor Energy Fund provides a one-time \$400 payment for heating assistance if the household income is between 60 and 80 percent of the state median.

Energy efficiency programs were also a key topic. Kevin Parse, Energy Efficiency Programs Coordinator at Unitil, reviewed Mass Save’s energy efficiency programs, including income-based options that provide no-cost or discounted energy efficiency services. He noted that the city of Fitchburg has been named a Designated Equity Community by Mass Save, which provides enhanced benefits for homes that have not been previously weatherized. Those who qualify receive 100% off weatherization upgrades, including insulation and air sealing.

Parse encouraged residents to visit masssave.com to complete the easy, no-cost income verification online, or to call 1-866-537-SAVE (7267) to learn more. For more information on qualifying for the Income Eligible Program, homeowners and renters should contact Making Opportunity Count in Fitchburg.



*Unitil's Kevin Parse reviews energy efficiency programs at the 25th Annual Energy Assistance Forum held in Fitchburg recently.
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