

CAP officials swamped with questions about new housing-focused program

By Marqise Allen / The Daily News | Posted: Tuesday, November 1, 2011 8:20 pm

Lower Columbia Community Action Program officials prepared for a large crowd of disgruntled people as Tuesday marked the first day those in a state assistance program would no longer directly receive regular monthly assistance checks worth \$197.

But the hordes never came.

Instead, staff dealt with a relatively steady flow of people looking to learn more about the specific changes that will take effect now that the Disability Lifeline for the Unemployed has officially fallen victim to state budget cuts.

"We got a lot of calls and were preparing for a crowd," said Lois Shelton, program manager for Help Warehouse, adding her staff fielded about 100 calls in a week after letters went out in early September to those enrolled in the program, alerting them of changes. "But it has been a very even pace."

CAP has a contract with Cowlitz County to establish a new program called Housing and Essential Needs. The program will continue providing those who qualify with up to \$197 for rent and utilities, albeit not directly. Rather than giving participants a check, the program will give the money directly to landlords and utility companies.

Unlike Disability Lifeline, the Housing and Essential Needs program is not an entitlement and all individuals who previously qualified for assistance may not receive benefits. Only those who are homeless or deemed to be at risk of being on the streets will receive aid.

There has been some confusion surrounding the new program.

Starla Watson, 50, regularly received \$197 a month pay her bills. The Longview woman lives in a three-bedroom home with four other adults and two children. All the adults pool their money to pay the rent and other bills and Watson said they would all be homeless if she were unable to pay her share. She feared she would be forced to live in a tent somewhere in town, until finding out the funds she used to receive would go directly to her landlord.

"I would prefer to ... take it to my bank and do what I've always done," she said.

Those interested in learning more about the Housing and Essential Needs program or enrolling will be given information and an application to complete, Shelton said. Applicants will come back next week to find out if they qualify for the program.

Michael Torres, CAP's program director, says he's been getting mixed feedback on the direct payments to landlords and utilities.

"There are some (program participants) who would want to pay their rent and have that level of control," Torres said. "Others would say they feel safer not having the responsibility and not worrying about it."

Torres added that he believes the new housing-focused program is the best option available at a time when funding is limited.

"I think it's sad as a state where we go from entitlement programs to non-entitlement programs for a population that needs it," he said. "But we don't have a choice."

CAP officials are unsure how long funding will be available for the program with the state Legislature preparing to convene for a special session in an attempt to cut into a projected \$1.5 billion budget shortfall. However, anyone deemed to be homeless or at high risk of losing their home should receive some aid.

"When we run out of money, the program will stop," Torres said.