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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Monica Pettengill Jerkins, Resource Developer
(207) 764-3721
mjerkins@acap-me.org

County organizations rally to heat homes this winter

United Way of Aroostook, along with Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP) and WAGM-TV are leading a County-wide effort to keep homes warm this winter with a Heating Homes with Helping Hands Telethon set to air on November 2.

Anyone who has spent a winter in Aroostook County knows about the wind that whips snow across the fields, rattling windows and blasting the exterior walls of homes in its path, or about the long, sub-freezing nights that begin as early as 3:30 in the afternoon and seem to never end. Winters in The County are harsh and long, causing folks to turn up their thermostats as soon as September and often times requiring heating resources well into the spring. But for thousands of Aroostook County residents, ranging from young families just starting out to elderly shut-ins, and countless others in-between, the costs of heating homes in the winter is a daunting responsibility, sometimes requiring creative, occasionally dangerous, measures just to keep from succumbing to the brutal cold temperatures.

“It's heartbreaking and often times frightening to hear the firsthand accounts and stories that are shared with our staff about what our most vulnerable neighbors do to try and keep themselves warm in their own homes during cold winter months,” explained ACAP Executive Director and CEO Jason Parent. “Aside from hearing about people who wear layers upon layers of clothing, keeping the thermostat at a dangerously low temperature to save on fuel, we regularly hear about residents confining themselves to one or two rooms of their homes and using space heaters. Even more frightening are those who will run the kitchen stove and sleep with the oven door open to generate heat. For too many who struggle to heat their homes with very limited resources, the result is making decisions to go without food or prescription drugs. That further compounds an already dangerous situation with resulting health complications. We are fortunate to have the resources we do to help as many people as we can, but the need clearly outpaces the resources available.”

Just last year, ACAP served more than 4,300 households in Aroostook County with heating and energy assistance programs. Another 175 households received emergency fuel assistance. In addition to those federally-funded heating assistance programs, ACAP used donated funds from private grants and donations to help 115 more households that were within a day or two of running out of heating fuel and who may for one reason or another been unable to qualify soon enough for federal programs to help them stay warm on some of the coldest days of the year. Of the homes
heated in that last category, 21 households involved seniors and 15 were young families with babies under two-years-old – both populations vulnerable to hyperthermia. There were 282 people impacted by private donations altogether, and thousands more who ACAP helped stay warm with its variety of programs.

The number of emergency fuel households ACAP assisted last year has increased since the organization has assumed that aspect of work from the former Helping Hands for Children and Families non-profit organization. That group ceased operations at the end of 2016.

The need is great, and ACAP’s community partners United Way and WAGM have come together to raise awareness and much needed donations with a Heating Homes with Helping Hands Telethon so that ACAP can continue its work for another fast-approaching winter heating season.

“After hearing about the struggles of so many people falling short of qualifying for traditional heating assistance and what our neighbors are doing to stay warm, we knew we had to step up and help bridge this gap”, says WAGM General Manager Kelly Landeen.

On November 2, throughout the day in newscasts and in break-in short segments, WAGM will broadcast live from its studio with information about the need for heating assistance in Aroostook County. This will be the second telethon the station has broadcast since becoming part of Gray Television, Inc., with its first successfully benefiting a veteran’s housing project here in The County. Callers will be able to reach out to volunteers manning multiple phone lines to make donations. United Way will collect the funds to track and distribute the donations. In the meantime, leading up to that date, WAGM, United Way and ACAP will work together to share stories from people who have benefited in the past from ACAP’s heating programs, and to raise awareness of the local needs.

“ACAP, WAGM and United Way of Aroostook are three unique organizations that are known for reaching people all across The County. Although our work is different in many ways, all three organizations work to build a stronger community. By working together and asking for community support, we are confident that we can help hundreds of households stay warm this winter,” said Sherry Locke, Executive Director of United Way.

A Facebook page has already been set up in advance of the telethon where the partner agencies will share statistics, stories and challenges to engage the community in the Heating Homes with Helping Hands initiative. One such challenge is already creating a buzz in the community. The Show Us Your Heart social media challenge encourages individuals, groups, organizations and businesses to do some creative thinking to make a short video or take a photo displaying their “heart” and challenging others to do the same. Individuals or organizations can make donations leading up to and throughout the telethon event.

“The people we will help with this program,” said ACAP Case Manager Heidi Rackliffe, “are individuals facing a heating crisis with no means of accessing a source of heat any other way. This is a last resort option in which all other avenues are looked at first. This is the elder woman on Friday afternoon who has no funds to her name and who must choose between medications or heat. This fund is for the new mom and dad who just delivered a baby or the worker who just lost their job and for the first time has no idea what to do, but needs help and is cold.”

In most cases, Rackliffe says, the funds raised from private sources enable the agency to help avert the crisis the same day the customer comes to ACAP needing assistance, rather than putting them through a lengthy application and wait process. Additionally, ACAP will make every effort to follow-up with those needing emergency heating assistance, once the crisis has passed and fuel has been delivered, to help the family or individual prevent future crises and match them with other, non-emergency assistance programs.

Anyone with questions, or who may be interested in making a donation prior to the telethon can contact Monica Jerkins at (207) 764-3721. A donation link is available on the WAGM-TV website at http://www.wagmtv.com/heatinghomeshelpinghands.