

The Desert Trail

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HEAP program still viable

By Rebecca Unger

Special to The Trail

MORONGO BASIN — A miscommunication between local aid agencies caused some to speculate recently that the Home Energy Assistance Program had run out of money to help low-income residents pay their utility bills.

"We are absolutely not out of money," said Charles Adams, deputy director for the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County, which oversees the program. "We had money left over from our 2009 budget and we just received our funding for 2010."

Not a county agency, the Community Action Partnership receives money from federal, state and private sources.

The concerns stemmed from the Monday, Jan. 4 HEAP workshop at the Sportsman's Club in Joshua Tree. When the staff member from the partnership didn't show up for the monthly workshop, attendees feared the utility-assistance program was broke.

The 25 families at the workshop were helped by other agencies, and were able to sign up for HEAP.

"Sixteen of those families

signed up for retroactive credit available from the remaining 2009 funds, and the other nine signed up for this year," Adams said.

The Community Action Partnership administers HEAP in the Morongo Basin to help qualifying low-income families and individuals with their utility bills. The program issues credits directly to the customer's utility provider for electricity, gas and propane.

"We also have vendor contracts with firewood providers," added utility assistance supervisor Shelly Scott.

Applications from families or individuals are accepted once each year, and can be for emergency utility assistance in case of a pending disconnection, or non-emergency annual assistance.

Workshops are conducted on the first Monday of every month at the Sportsman's Club.

Applicants must bring documentation including picture identification, Social Security card, current bills and income verification.

"It's a wonderful service,"

Adams said.

He vows that his agency is committed to serving everyone who is eligible, reaching those who live in remote areas of the county or who have transportation problems.

As the economy continues to slide, Adams said the partnership has seen significantly more people applying for help through HEAP.

"We're seeing folks who were in the middle-income bracket apply for the first time because they had pay cuts, lost their jobs or lost their homes."

The partnership also offers assistance to the homeless, provides a range of family-development services and affiliates with others to maintain a food bank and stock feeding sites.

Adams hopes that no one is discouraged from applying for these benefits because of rumors or red tape.

For information on the programs, call (909) 723-1500.

Comments? Questions? E-mail Rebecca Unger at runger@hidesertstar.com