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## NJ 2-1-1 Partnership

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**CONTACT: Tom Cosentino, MWW  
609-396-0067**

### **WITH WINTER COMING, NJ 2-1-1 IS RESOURCE FOR ASSISTING NJ RESIDENTS DEALING WITH INCREASED UTILITY COSTS AND RELATED EXPENSES**

East Hanover, NJ (October 22, 2014) – With many individuals and families in New Jersey facing significant hardships as winter fast approaches, NJ 2-1-1, the free, user-friendly information and referral service that connects people-in-need with critical health and human service resources, is here to assist residents who are looking for ways to manage increased heating costs and related household expenses. “We are open 24 hours a day, every day of the year and we are here to assist people in locating existing programs and services that are designed to help,” explains Tom Mergola, NJ 2-1-1’s director of operations. By dialing 211 from any cell phone or landline in the state, callers are connected with a knowledgeable resource specialist who has been trained to find the best resources available. Residents can also search the very same resource database online by going to the organization’s website [www.nj211.org](http://www.nj211.org).

“For several years now we have maintained a special section on our website that is devoted to educating people about utility assistance,” Mergola continues. The section of the site that he is referencing begins at <http://www.nj211.org/energy/index.cfm>. Visitors will find information about every program available in the state for people who are struggling to pay utility bills. Additionally, NJ 2-1-1 provides valuable links to applications, eligibility guidelines and contact information for the agencies associated with each program. A companion guide, *NJ 2-1-1 2014/2015 Energy and Utility Assistance Guide*, bearing the full breadth of information offered on the site along with a two-sheet *Utility Assistance At-A-Glance* can be [downloaded](#) from the NJ 2-1-1 website as well.

Web pages are designed to connect New Jersey residents with established utility assistance programs throughout the state. 2-1-1 resource specialists provide this information to callers as well.

[UTILITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS](#) - The utility assistance section of the site begins with a review of the utility assistance programs that are funded by state and federal government in an effort to help low-income residents with their heating and medically necessary cooling bills. Some programs make provisions for emergency heating system services and emergency fuel assistance, while others enable home modifications that result in long-term energy savings.

The programs have income eligibility guidelines associated with them which are based upon a figure known as the Federal Poverty Level. Set by the federal government each year, this figure reflects an annual income that is considered to be at the poverty level based upon the number of members in a family and the cost of living.

NJ 2-1-1 serves as the state's USF/LIHEAP hotline. Information about these two energy assistance programs along with several others are highlighted on the organization's website. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is designed to help low-income families and individuals meet home heating and medically necessary cooling costs. This year, the application period is October 1, 2014 to April 30, 2015. The FFY 2015 LIHEAP [application](#) is also an application for the Universal Service Fund Program (USF), a program created by the State of New Jersey to help make natural gas and electric bills more affordable for low-income households. Other energy assistance programs discussed on the site include the TRUE Program, PAGE Program, NJ Shares, Lifeline, Comfort Partners, and the Weatherization Assistance Program.

[ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS SPONSORED BY INDIVIDUAL UTILITY COMPANIES](#) - Utility companies are well aware that many of their customers are facing very difficult financial hardships. With this in mind NJ 2-1-1 has included a page that presents the variety of programs offered by various utility companies in the state and encourages readers to call their utility company to find out about the programs and payment options that are offered.

[NJ BOARD OF PUBLIC UTILITIES](#) - In an effort to educate and empower New Jersey consumers, a page is devoted to listing consumer rights and explaining how to file a consumer complaint with the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (BPU), complete with all of the contact information needed. The BPU is a regulatory authority with a statutory mandate to ensure safe, adequate, and proper utility services at reasonable rates for customers in New Jersey. BPU regulates critical services such as natural gas, electricity, water, and telecommunications and cable television; addresses issues of consumer protection, energy reform, deregulation of energy and telecommunications services and the restructuring of utility rates to encourage energy conservation and competitive pricing in the industry; and is responsible for monitoring utility service and responding to consumer complaints.

[ENERGY EFFICIENCY MEASURES](#) - New Jersey's Clean Energy Program

Even if your income is too high for you to be eligible for assistance through some of the programs discussed on previous web pages, you may find energy relief from resources discussed on the page that is devoted to energy efficiency measures, rebates and promotions, and energy saving tips. Recognized as a national model, New Jersey's Clean Energy Program offers financial incentives, programs, and services for residential, commercial, and municipal customers to save energy, money, and the environment. Financial assistance is available for efforts that will promote increased energy efficiency and support the installation of clean, renewable sources of energy.

Among the resources discussed on this page is the Home Performance with ENERGY STAR® program. Brought to you by the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities and New Jersey's Clean Energy Program, it offers "whole house" solutions to reduce both your energy costs and carbon footprint. If you are eligible, you may be able to take advantage of financial incentives that will lead to increased comfort, safety, and durability of your home.

[LOCAL COUNTY RESOURCES](#) - - The local application agencies highlighted on this page of the site include Community Action Programs (CAP) and Community Based Organizations (CBO); each offer a place to turn in your local community when you are having a problem paying your utility bills. These organizations are designed to help you access programs like LIHEAP, USF and Weatherization. They often administer other programs devoted to helping people find solutions to the challenges faced by individuals and families with limited resources. Also included in this section of the site is a link to a county listing of New Jersey's Board of Social Services – County boards provide eligible residents with financial, medical, and social service assistance for emergency circumstances as well as ongoing needs.

The utility section ends with a page devoted to other state and local resources that can ease the financial burdens of residents. Here you will find such resources as NJ Helps, a web service that helps determine what programs and assistance an individual and their family may be eligible for; and links to other educational pages on the NJ 2-1-1 website which focus on resources pertaining to child and family matters, the Earned Income Tax Credit program; employment and training assistance; food and nutrition programs such as NJ SNAP and EndHungerNJ; health insurance; income support for adults; affordable housing; mortgage assistance; seniors and people with disabilities and telephone payment assistance.

“Experience with helping callers find solutions to the challenges they face, has taught us the importance of exploring alternative resources,” explains Janice Kaniewski, NJ 2-1-1's call center director. She continues, “A caller may not be eligible for assistance with their utility costs, but may be able to save money through other resources, which will then free up funds to pay the heating bill. Our call specialists try to explore all of the possibilities with people who are calling NJ 2-1-1. That is what this final page in the utility assistance section of the website does as well.”

The national 2-1-1 network makes available a free, user-friendly phone number that serves 90% of America's population, and connects some 16 million people a year to critical resources, information and services. In New Jersey close to 230,000 people called 2-1-1 for help last year. Over 212,000 visited the website in search of resources and education.

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Tours of New Jersey's 2-1-1 call center in East Hanover are available upon request. For additional reports about calls handled by NJ 2-1-1 Partnership contact Thomas Mergola at 973-929-3704 or visit [www.nj211.org](http://www.nj211.org).