



## NJ 2-1-1 Partnership

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CONTACT: Lori Price Abrams, MWW (609.503.8043)  
Sue Ross, NJ 2-1-1 (973.929.3747)

### Energy Assistance Takes Many Forms NJ 2-1-1 Answers the Call

**East Hanover, NJ** – When temperatures begin to dip, those who are struggling to make ends meet and even those who are financially stable are aware of what this can mean to a tight family budget. For years NJ 2-1-1 has anticipated these concerns and provided NJ residents with a comprehensive review of energy assistance programs that help to manage costs during the heating season.

Many of the energy assistance programs begin taking applications on October 1 and so the call center expects to hear from people in need of help in the coming days and weeks. Call Center Director, Janice Kaniewski, says, “We’re ready. As the state’s Energy Assistance Hotline, our staff is well-versed in all of the available programs and services along with corresponding eligibility guidelines.” She continues, “Our website offers a complete review of programs as well as links to state websites, applications, application agency listings and more.” For those who want a snapshot of what is available, the organization has created a chart entitled “[Utility Assistance at a Glance](#).”

NJ 2-1-1 receives thousands of calls each year from residents who are struggling to pay utility bills so that they can stay warm. There are many programs designed to assist people. Some of them are federally funded, while others are supported through state and local sources. “We understand what it’s like for people who are struggling. The different programs and their eligibility standards - - it’s a lot to digest,” says board president Gina Plotino. “NJ 2-1-1 takes care to help clients find the right program.”

Many of the programs have income eligibility guidelines associated with them that are based on the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), an index that changes every year. LIHEAP (Low income Home Energy Assistance Program) and USF (Universal Service Fund), help those who earn 200% and 175% of the FPL respectively. Applicants apply to both programs at once using a common application form that can be downloaded directly from the state [website](#), and which can be found on the [home page](#) and in the [Utility Assistance section](#) of the organization’s website. Once completed, applications and required documentation is submitted to local application agencies for processing. NJ 2-1-1 is able to check on the progress of an application for a caller once an agency has begun to process it.

NJ 2-1-1 plays an active role in assisting people to apply to the TRUE (Temporary Relief for Utility Expenses) and PAGE (Payment Assistance for Gas & Electric) programs as well. Both programs were created to assist the low-to-moderate income resident. These programs are funded by the NJ Board of

Public Utilities and administered through the Affordable Housing Alliance. NJ 2-1-1 was named an Affiliate Agency last year. “We have always been able to assist callers by providing them with information about how these programs work and offering referrals to agency resources. With an affiliate status we are able to take our services one step further and actually process their application. This increased efficiency makes it that much easier for people to get the help they need,” explains Ms. Plotino.

For households which do not qualify for the energy programs described above and whose income does not exceed 400 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, there is NJSHARES (New Jersey Statewide Heating Assistance and Referral Energy Service) a non-profit organization which administers an energy-assistance program that may be able to help. Eligible recipients of this grant program may be awarded up to \$700 for heating costs and \$500 for electric service in a given season. Other available assistance programs include those that offer weatherization assistance to eligible families, resulting in home improvements that bring energy costs down and rebates for energy saving appliances.

“Finding the right assistance when you are struggling to keep your family warm can feel overwhelming. We hear that when we talk with people,” explains Ms. Kaniewski. “Our staff has been carefully trained on these programs so that they are better able to connect callers with the most appropriate resource.”

A call to NJ 2-1-1 will cut through the confusion. Staff can explain the details of the different programs; provide access to applications; check the status on LIHEAP/USF applications that have been filed; process PAGE and TRUE applications; and talk with callers about other resources that may help with needs like food, clothing and affordable housing. Open 24 hours a day, the organization can be reached by dialing 211. Their statewide resource database is accessible to all from any page of their [website](#) and their [utility assistance pages](#) provide essential information to those wanting to learn more.

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#### **About NJ 2-1-1**

The statewide information and referral service began in 2002 when the United Ways of New Jersey spearheaded efforts to give people-in-need an easy way to find health and human services by encouraging the Board of Public Utilities to designate the NJ 2-1-1 Partnership as the sole administrator of the three digit dialing code. Statewide coverage began in 2005. **In 2015 alone, the NJ 2-1-1 Partnership provided resource assistance to over 372,000 people who called 2-1-1 or visited our website.** With roughly 3,000 agencies in the organization’s resource database and over 10,000 programs and services listed, NJ 2-1-1 provides the public with front door access to non-profit, government and faith-based services, as well as disaster response information. Follow us on Twitter @NJ211 and FB <https://www.facebook.com/nj211partnership/>.