



The CAC Energy Services H.E.A.P. (that's Home Energy Assistance Program) program is busy these days – and it takes teamwork to handle it. When Martha Vargas, Energy Services Assistant, started with the H.E.A.P. program in 2008, there were about two emergency applications per month. “Now, there multiple emergencies on a daily basis,” says Martha. It's a good thing she has a teammate, Energy Services Assistant Karla Alvarado. These two women handle all H.E.A.P. cases for the entire county. When asked why there has been such a dramatic increase in emergencies recently, Martha answers without hesitation, “The economy - people can't find jobs!”

What does H.E.A.P. do? When a low-income person or household faces the disconnection of their utilities, or has already had their utilities disconnected, they can submit an application requesting payment assistance once annually from H.E.A.P. The utility may be electricity, gas, or in rural areas, wood, propane or oil. Emergencies are fast-tracked to prevent shut-off or restore utilities quickly. If a client has a crisis and it's been less than 12 months since they were last served, Martha and Karla will do their best to refer them to another community resource.

H.E.A.P. also takes regular applications from people whose utilities are not threatened but who need help with their bill.

People learn about H.E.A.P. when they are referred by the utility companies, by community service providers, and through Energy Services outreach or the Energy Services Weatherization Program. They can pick up applications for payment assistance (for both emergency and regular cases) at the CAC offices in North County (201 W. Chapel St. in Santa Maria), Mid County (120 W. Chestnut Ave. in Lompoc) and South County (5638 Hollister Ave. in Goleta).

Martha takes clients whose last names begin with A to L. Karla has M to Z – and there are lots of both. 2,616 households received utility payment assistance in 2012. As far as phone calls go, Martha takes them in the morning and Karla takes them in the afternoon. Both must answer and check messages on three lines - the English phone line (964-8857 x290), the Spanish phone line (x291) and their own voicemail. The women back each other up on emergencies and regular applications whenever it is necessary.

CAC has 48 business hours to complete an application for utility payment assistance once they get a phone call from a distressed client. It's a challenge when that call comes in at 4:00 on a Friday afternoon, but Karla and Martha are there to answer it and do what can be done. Everyone who qualifies by income gets help from H.E.A.P., although there are priorities: people aged 60 and over, those who are disabled, and families with children aged five and under. It's a busy office, and thank goodness there is a team to handle it.