

Politics and Economics

County prepares to provide fuel assistance

by Natalie Ferrigno

This winter, in response to the worsening economy, local and state government and non-profit organizations are bracing themselves for increased demands for heating and food assistance.

Traditionally middle-class families are among those currently lining up for help this winter, as local oil delivery companies report an average increase of \$1 per gallon of heating oil, a change that has more families than ever scrambling for relief.

Nicole Summers, executive director of the Faith Centre in Bellefonte, is concerned that some of the families her organization aids with food and clothing will also be struggling to pay higher heating bills.

Summers cited the example of “a solidly middle-class family” with two children and one working parent who earns \$35,000 a year. The family is now relying on the food bank for assistance and using the savings to cover increased heating costs.

“You weren’t seeing that type of client a couple of years ago” Summers said.

While the cost of oil on the market fallen recently to half of its top price, most oil delivery companies claim prices are “pre-

bought” when households agree to their yearly plan.

Additionally, the window for signing up for any sort of budget plan is long closed for the companies that do offer them.

To those who find for the first time that they cannot afford heating oil, all of this may come as a shock—and pose unexpected problems.

The concern that more people than expected will require aid reaches far beyond Centre County. In response to this concern, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives recently passed House Bill 2021 to increase the Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) maximum-income threshold from 150 percent to approximately 210 percent above the federal poverty line, or about \$44,443 for a family of four. This change effectively increases the number of families who will be eligible for LIHEAP.

With the new easing of LIHEAP’s eligibility requirements, many of these families may be in the clear. However, some still fall through the cracks, and local non-profits are working to help those families with their energy needs.

While oil delivery companies do work

with these groups by delivering smaller quantities to keep costs low, most still require the non-profits to pay for the oil.

Additionally, the fact that no one really knows how many people will require aid this year makes planning difficult. Matt Hall of Interfaith Mission is not sure how many more families will be turning to his and other organizations. “We have nothing to base estimates on [as] this has never happened before,” he said.

Hall added that Interfaith has been getting many calls from families who have no idea what to do. He encourages these families to try to qualify for LIHEAP in order to use government funds before turning to a non-profit like Interfaith, which is run with private money from 22 local congregations.

If a family does not qualify for LIHEAP, Hall recommended calling the local Community Action Office. (See inset.)

Centre County has stepped in with some assistance and advice for those looking to save on heating costs this winter. Community Help Centre, a non-profit organization “geared toward improved life skills and financial management skills,” has established a Basic Needs Task Force answer questions about heating, food, shel-

ter and transportation in the area.

For those who can help, donations can be made to the Centre County Fuel Bank at 2100C East College Ave., State College, Pa 16801. This organization is a registered non-profit, and donations are tax-deductible.

To apply for LIHEAP assistance:

Centre County Assistance:
1-800-355-6024 or
814-861-1955.

The Community Action Office has locations in Philipsburg (814-342-0404), Bellefonte (814-355-7501) and Millheim (814-349-5850).

The Basic Needs Task Force:
1-800-494-2500 or visit
www.co.centre.pa.us/needs/default.asp.

Military recruiters set up shop in teenager hangout

by Sophie Kerszberg

When radio station QWK Rock approached brothers Christian and “Shaggy” Pfeifer, owners of Skate Penn in State College, about hosting an arm wrestling contest partly sponsored by the U.S. Army, the brothers agreed. Skate Penn, a skateboarding store and Centre County’s only mini indoor skate park, has about 400 members aged six to 36, with an average age of 15 to 20, according to Pfeifer.

After the arm wrestling contest, the Skate Penn owners and Army recruiters from State College developed a friendly relationship. Both Skate Penn and the Army insist that no money changes hands, but Christian and Shaggy said they like helping the recruiters highlight to their teenage members what they see as a valuable opportunity. The Army was Christian’s ticket out of his hometown, he said, and after the Army paid for his college education, he was able to open his business.

“I do believe that almost everybody could benefit from basic training, at least,” Pfeifer said. “The military provides leadership and valuable skills. It gives them [the teenagers] a chance to stay out of trouble, grow up, and better themselves.”

He said another reason he allows the recruiters into his business is that he respects that the recruiters have a job to do, and said he would let other groups talk to members too. Skate Penn displays Army brochures, keychains and a sign declaring that the Army can provide \$50,000 in benefits. The recruiters visit about once a month, sometimes more in the spring.

In addition to skating, Skate Penn has an area where the members can sit and watch TV or play Guitar Hero and other video games.

“Our attitude is, this is a place where kids can come and hang out. We’re sort of like

see **Military**, pg. 4



Skate Penn co-owner Shaggy Pfeifer lets Army recruiters into his business to talk to customers.

Photo by Suzan Erem

from **Military**, pg. 3

babysitters for the younger ones," said Pfeifer, who said he tries to guide the teenagers about many issues, one of them being whether to join the military. "I was briefly in the Army; I give them the real story. I tell them to get everything in writing and to read the fine print before they sign on to anything."

Not everybody agrees that Skate Penn's owners are providing a service with their relationship with the Army.

"The average age of around 16—these are very impressionable teenagers, probably in need of money—perfect for the recruiters to go after," said State College resident and former Skate Penn member Doug Baldwin. "To them, they're just offering opportunities to the kids. They feel bad when they see kids who have little direction or ambition. But joining the Army means risking your life. There are other things they can do. If they're so concerned about the kids' futures, why not put together a scholarship or something, or showcase other kinds of opportunities, like trade schools?" He added that he is bothered by the way recruiters try to sell the military as a way to see the world and have "excitement and thrill—that's how the recruiters tried to sell it to me."

Sergeant Timothy Brown of the State College recruiting station offered a different perspective.

"We sometimes go do what we call area canvassing," he said. "We go into business and try to build a relationship with them if they are Army-friendly. That's difficult around here because many businesses tend to just want to focus on their business. Skate Penn is the only business we currently have a relationship with."

Brown is passionate about his work.

"I believe in this mission: keeping our Army strong," he said. "When we're out recruiting, we talk to people, tell them about our experiences in the Army. It's just, 'Hi, my name is Sergeant Brown. Have you ever thought about the Army?' If they say no, we move on."

Brown said a recruiter usually has to talk to 50 to 75 people to get one recruit.

He said they target men 17 to 25, and up to age 40. For the reserves, they focus on Penn State freshmen, who might want the military's help financially to keep them in school. For active duty, they look at 17-year-olds who don't think college is for them or people who have already finished college and want hands-on experience.

But Brown said pressuring people isn't the way to win quality recruits.

"We don't ever try to be a bully, because that would be counterproductive for us," he said. "We want quality soldiers. That's the most important thing: a quality soldier. If they're not truly interested in serving, they're not going to be the dedicated, sophisticated, never-give-up kind of quality soldier we want."

Army reserves soldier and current college student Brandon Wilson agreed.

"I did not feel pressured by anyone," he said. "It was my choice. I did my own research. I mainly joined the Army because of the education award. The recruiter I talked to kind of encouraged some people who might not like it not to sign up."

Seth Kurilla, 16, and Joey Kustaborder, 15, said they go skate and hang out at Skate Penn three to four days a week during summer vacations, and "as much as we can" during the school year.

"Shaggy and Christian are like our parents. We trust them," Kustaborder said. Both said they have spoken to the recruiters and they are "very friendly," but they're not interested in joining the Army. Kurilla wants to be a mechanic after high school.

Standing for choice



State High students staged a counter-protest on Oct. 13, 2008 in response to anti-abortion activists who displayed pictures of bloody fetuses a week earlier in front of the school. Willie Chase, left, and Stephen Zimmerer were two of the choice supporters.

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