



February 7, 2022

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **With Rising Cost of Utilities, ACAP and Agency on Aging Urge Older Adult Renters to Apply for Pandemic Relief Program**

**Aroostook County** – The cost of living -- including the price of heating fuel and electricity -- has increased sharply for everyone during the time of Covid-19, however the impact has hit older adults who live on fixed income especially hard. Two northern Maine social service agencies are partnering to raise awareness about a program that could bring relief for those who rent – including those living in subsidized housing.

Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP) and Aroostook Agency on Aging are encouraging older adults in the region to apply for a program that was created to help them with paying their rent and utilities for up to 18 months. The Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program, administered locally by ACAP, aims to assist renters whose household budgets have been impacted by the increased cost of living over the past two years.

“The ERA program is there to help renters who fall within the income guidelines and are in exactly this position – worried about how they will afford to make ends meet with the rising cost of living and income that has not kept up with the additional costs,” said Jason Parent, ACAP Executive Director/CEO.

Many older adults in Aroostook County, especially those who are retired, qualify for this program but, relatively few have applied, according to Joy Barresi Saucier, Executive Director of the Agency on Aging. “ACAP and our Agency are hoping to change that to help reduce some of the added stress and fear that many are currently feeling,” she said.

### **Aroostook County Action Program**

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Income eligibility guidelines for the program in Aroostook County require a household of two to have an annual income of \$41,000 or less. A single person, living alone in a rental unit, qualifies if they make under \$35,850 a year. Households can apply for both rental and utility assistance or just one or the other if they prefer.

According to Parent, many older County residents initially declined applying for the rental assistance program this fall when ACAP staff offered to help sign them up at the same time they applied for their annual benefit through the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP). The fear of many was that support provided through the ERA program would be counted as income and negatively impact individuals and households when they filed their taxes or applied for assistance under other programs.

However, officials with ACAP and the Agency have confirmed, through statewide ERA program administrator MaineHousing, that this program will not count against recipient households. The reason is because any benefit is paid directly to the landlord or, in the case of utilities, to the utility provider. Payments are not received directly by the renter, do not will count toward their income.

With this new information in mind, officials with the social services agencies are calling attention to the program in hopes that those who rent will reconsider and apply.

The ERA program can cover the cost of electricity, water, sewer, trash, heat, and internet. Applicants may request help with paying for utilities even if they do not need help paying for rent, however, applicants do need to apply for help with rent in order to apply for assistance paying internet costs. Additionally, the program can also cover late fees for rent as long as the late fees are legal and included in the lease language.

Currently, there is no similar pandemic assistance relief available to homeowners. However, ACAP and Agency on Aging officials are aware of homeowner relief programs that are being developed by the Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection and offered in the coming months.

For those requesting rental and or rental/internet payment assistance, the process includes ACAP staff reaching out to the landlord and making arrangements to direct rental payments

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through the program to cover the monthly payment. Processing time for applications varies according to volume, but can take between four and eight weeks.

To speed up the process, a website ([www.mainerentrelief.com](http://www.mainerentrelief.com)) has been created for users who wish to apply online. Once on the website, applicants should scroll down to the section “application” and select Aroostook County and click on the “find my agency” button. From there, select the “apply on-line now” button under the ACAP contact information to access the fillable application form. Those who prefer to apply over the phone or need more information, are asked to call ACAP at (207) 764-3721.

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#### **About Aroostook County Action Program**

For fifty years, Aroostook County Action Program has provided the people of Aroostook County with services and resources that help individuals and families achieve greater economic independence. As a leader, or in partnership with others, ACAP provides guidance to the community in responding to emerging human needs in the areas of community health, early care and education, energy and housing, and workforce development services. Aroostook County Action Program continues to accept new clients as well as serve existing clients through a vast array of programming. To learn more about available services available, contact the ACAP Team at 207-764-3721.

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