

HEAP o' help— 'ombudslady' to the rescue

Baldwin House stalwart helps other tenants get \$93 to \$161 energy credit

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

ANTOINETTA Stadlman calls herself the ombudslady — she insists on the capital “L” — for Baldwin House, a privately owned, 188-unit SRO at 74 Sixth St. Among her many good deeds is the help she gives fellow tenants with their HEAP forms.

The result is that most eligible Baldwin residents get a nice little annual reimbursement check — as of this year, 15% of one month's rent — to offset high utility costs. Tenants at the other 499 SROs in the city, where Stadlman does not live, aren't always as lucky.

Launched in 1974 after the OPEC oil embargo, the Home Energy Assistance Program gives eligible low-income people a break on their gas and electricity bills. If their room or apartment is individually metered, HEAP pays the utility company on their behalf, and a credit shows up on a subsequent bill. Tenants living in buildings that are mass-metered get a check to offset the utilities that are included in their rent.

HEAP's one-page form looks simple. “But a lot of the people living in SROs, I'd say as many as 75% in my building, simply can't handle it themselves,” Stadlman says. “They'd have to physically go get the form, gather up monthly income and rent documentation, then get the form back to the right place.”

The only place to get forms is the Economic Opportunity Council, on Fillmore near Geary. EOC processes the applications and sends them to the state Department of Community Services and Development, which makes HEAP payments using federal money that originates in Health and Human Services.

HOW SHE DOES IT

Stadlman says she goes to EOC, usually in March, and picks up 100-plus forms, lets fellow tenants know she's got them and meets individually with those who want to apply.

“I start in March, but I wind up doing it throughout the year,” she said. “People trickle in, sometimes up until December.”

After she gets the information from a tenant, she enters it on a form, and when she has a batch, she totes them back to EOC. Having helped with HEAP forms for seven years, she says, she has the process down pat. However, payment formulas and the forms themselves change from year to year, she said, which makes it harder still for the disabled and elderly to do it themselves.

“It just takes someone to follow through for them,” Stadlman said.

Until a few years ago, she said, HEAP applicants whose rent included utilities had to get their landlords or managers to calculate the tenants' percentage of “energy burden” for the form. Stadlman knew the formula and, working with the Baldwin manager, did the calculations.

Last year, both direct HEAP payments and utility credits were based on the applicant's income and household size. The assistance ranged from \$82 to \$141. To qualify, a single person's monthly income couldn't exceed \$1,653, a household of two a maximum of \$2,149, up to about \$5,000 for a family of 15.

This year, the formula has changed again. Direct HEAP payments now are a flat 15% of monthly rent. Utility credits, still based on income and household size, range from \$93 to \$161. The move toward simplification may help a little, but the

problem of people who approach forms with trepidation may persist.

Sharon Johnson, chief of staff in state Sen. John Burton's office, came to a March Tenant Associations Coalition meeting to help spread the word about HEAP assistance. Unfortunately, she said, she was there in lieu of Esther Lee, who handles HEAP concerns for Burton's office. Lee, who keeps up with HEAP's permutations, might have been able to clarify some of the confusion. Johnson, instead, got an earful and couldn't respond on the spot.

“In seven years, I think I only got HEAP once,” said Bernard Schertzer, who lives at the Altamont Hotel at 3048 16th St. He seemed unclear about why he hadn't been getting the assistance regularly.

SROs NEED MORE STAFF

“Buildings don't have appropriate staff to help people with applications,” said TAC Program Director Michael Nulty. “We have to educate the staff and we're not paid to do that. It's a widespread problem.”

Alliance for a Better District 6 membership Chairman John Nulty said, “Some calculations can only be done by management and some of them are not willing to do that.” The Nultys are twin brothers and among the most active of the neighborhood's organizers.

John Nulty also said he thought that sometimes the application forms are in short supply. “That's the way people fall through the cracks,” he said. [The Extra called EOC to ask if they ever run out of forms. Never, said the clerk, attesting to the incredible feat.]

Johnson apologized for not having more information, but promised to get back to those who were having problems and encouraged them to call. “Unless we hear about [problems], we can't do anything about it.”

The Extra called Schertzer to see if Johnson had kept her word.

“She called me back two days later,” he said, “and that was good. She explained about the 15%, the new formula, so I'm going to go to the EOC office and get a form.”

The whole thing sounds less forbidding, he said. But, just in case, he's going to take another tenant from his building with him. ■

HEAP information: EOC
749-6491 and
www.csd.ca.gov/LIHEAP.html



PHOTO BY MARK ELLINGER

Antoinetta Stadlman (left) helps Baldwin House tenant Rudy Osuna apply for a state energy rebate through HEAP.

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