



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS

M. JODI RELL
GOVERNOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 14, 2007

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Governor Rell Reassures Clients of New Haven's Community Action Agency: Services to Public Continue

Governor M. Jodi Rell today reassured residents served by the Community Action Agency of New Haven that winter heating assistance, meals on wheels and other vital services will continue without interruption in the wake of yesterday's execution of a search warrant by federal authorities.

"My primary and immediate concern is to ensure the continuity of services for the thousands of area residents who rely on this community action agency for services," Governor Rell said. "With single-digit temperatures in the forecast I am assuring seniors, people with disabilities and families with children that our winter heating assistance program will remain fully open during the federal review."

Department of Social Services Commissioner Michael P. Starkowski reported to the Governor that his agency has implemented an action plan to guarantee the continuity of services while the federal review is ongoing.

The Community Action Agency of New Haven serves eligible residents of the Elm City, North Haven, West Haven, East Haven and Hamden by taking applications and determining eligibility for the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program. Other services are provided to residents of additional towns in the area.

Officials of the federal Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Housing and Urban Development yesterday removed files – including applications and related documents – as well as three CAA agency computers used in determining eligibility for energy assistance benefits. In addition, personnel files and payroll information for a number of CAANH employees were seized in the search.

In light of the events, Commissioner Starkowski authorized the immediate transfer of three DSS computers to CAANH in order to maintain their technical ability to process energy assistance applications. In addition, the Commissioner directed CAANH to remain open this weekend, authorizing overtime pay in order to recapture the energy assistance processing time lost in yesterday's search.

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Moreover, four staff persons from New Opportunities, the community action agency serving the Waterbury region, are being deployed to CAANH at the Commissioner's request to assist in the application processing effort this weekend.

The commissioner also directed that his agency contact the Independent Connecticut Petroleum Association to assure that enrolled fuel vendors continued to receive timely payments for the deliveries they make to households eligible for the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program.

"Participating oil and kerosene vendors, a mainstay in the program, should be confident that their services will continue to be eligible for timely reimbursement in the program," Governor Rell said.

The Community Action Agency of New Haven has been the subject of a number of complaints or allegations of impropriety over the last several years. Commissioner Starkowski last week assigned a six-member oversight team to review and approve expenditures of state and federal funds by CAANH. In a larger initiative also authorized by Governor Rell, the Commissioner directed DSS auditors to conduct a statewide review of meal delivery programs operated by other non-profit service providers.

The state action follows notification to DSS by CAANH Executive Director Amos Smith that he had discovered his agency has been double-billing the Agency on Aging of South Central Connecticut for meal delivery services to clients of state- and federally funded programs. The Agency on Aging paid CAANH twice for the same meals from two different funding sources.

No dollar amount was immediately available, but Commissioner Starkowski said it appears the double-billing has been occurring for some clients for the past several years.

"This news is the latest in a series of problems at CAANH dating back many years and which resulted in DSS requiring a corrective action plan regarding the governance and administration of the agency," the Commissioner wrote in a letter to Smith last week. "It is understood that CAANH is a private, non-profit organization and, as such, has a large degree of autonomy and independence. However, because a huge portion of CAANH's funding is derived from federal and state appropriations under the auspices of DSS, this agency has a responsibility to require accountability, provide financial oversight and, if necessary, take whatever action is required to ensure the integrity of these funding streams."

Commissioner Starkowski acknowledged in his letter that Smith is a relatively new Executive Director who inherited certain problems. "I appreciate your notification to DSS of the double-billing problem," he wrote. "I know that you, as a professional in the field, will understand and support the rationale for this action and the critical importance of its success in resolving the financial and programmatic issues at hand."



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In addition to stationing the quality assurance oversight team at Community Action Agency of New Haven, DSS auditors will visit that agency and the Agency on Aging of South Central Connecticut to audit and identify the double-billing overpayment amount. The funding sources in question are the state-funded Connecticut Home Care Program for Elders and the mainly federally-funded Elderly Nutrition Program under Title III of the Older Americans Act.

Next, DSS will audit all meals-on-wheels elderly nutrition contractors and sub-contractors to determine if there have been other cases of double-billing for the same meals delivered to low-income clients.

The Elderly Nutrition Program, funded at \$11.2 million to 13 non-profit contractors, serves about 15,400 Connecticut clients with meals in community settings and about 8,100 clients with home-delivered meals. The Connecticut Home Care Program for Elders serves additional clients with home-delivered meals as part of its role in helping senior citizens avoid institutionalization.

Commissioner Starkowski stressed that DSS has no reason to suspect at this time that other meal delivery programs are affected by double-billing or other financial irregularities. A statewide review is necessary, however, to ensure that fiscal missteps are not occurring elsewhere, he said.

Members of the new DSS quality assurance oversight team began working at CAANH last week. Commissioner Starkowski said they will be there indefinitely as part of the overall effort to help the agency rebound from its operational problems.