

# Local

## Assistance programs help low-income pay their bills

By CAROL THOMAS  
Battalion Reporter

Agencies in the Bryan-College Station area have developed various programs to help lessen the burden of everyday expenses, as well as the anguish of poverty, for low-income families.

Three of these programs are: the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, the Energy Assistance program and Outreach.

WIC, a program within the Brazos Valley Community Action Agency, is designed to supply the nutritional needs of women and their infants and children. Based on economic and nutritional need, women are issued food vouchers or cards that can be exchanged at certain grocery stores for nutritious foods such as eggs, milk, cereal, cheese and juice.

But the program supplies more than nutritional foods; it supplies nutritional education.

"We teach them about vitamins and minerals, and spending money wisely," said Sally Hudson, WIC director. "We feel if they do have knowledge they'll be healthier."

Hudson said participants are given a dietary assessment before entering the program in order to determine which foods are needed. The foods are supplemental, she said, and do not supply the total need. "We might find problems like inadequate diet and growth, a history of health problems or iron deficiency," Hudson said.

The food cards are issued monthly and are accompanied by a lesson in nutritional education including a film on pre-natal nutrition. The film also stresses the importance of spending money wisely on nutritional foods.

One young mother, whose husband is a food science major at Texas A&M University, said she had already learned much about nutrition from him and was more interested in the food.

"I needed food for my daughter, who is 16 months," she said. The woman said WIC had not lowered her food costs significantly. "But it is a good help," she said.

Another mother said she was interested in the nutritional education as well as the food cards. "I wanted to see the films and things," she said. "My little boy is aemic."

The woman said the program had definitely made a difference in her son's life. "I try to give him the right kinds of foods now, and he's a lot chubbier."

Although the foods supplied by WIC are only supplemental, Hudson said the overall results have been good. "We do an assessment every six months," she said. "And most of them do improve."

But there have been problems, she said. One problem is misuse of the food cards. For example, some people try to redeem the food cards for something not allowed in the program.

Hudson said the grocery stores, as well as the individual participants, have a duty to make sure only the nutritional foods specified are purchased with the food cards. "We're not sure where the fault lies," she said.

Another major problem is lack of funds. The WIC program is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture. At one time they were able to serve 400. But because of a cut in funds, the case load has been cut to 1,200.

A major problem in the lives of the low income is paying their bills, especially electricity. The Energy Assistance program at BVCAA is designed to help people trim their electricity bills through weatherizing homes.

to Farmers Home Administration, which provides low-interest loans and grants to low-income people who need to remodel or rebuild.

In many cases, elderly people's health is so poor they are not able to perform small housekeeping tasks, like answering mail or getting food stamps.

Outreach is designed to help such people. By visiting the people in their homes, staff members can take care of these possibly difficult tasks, refer the individuals to other agencies if their need is very great and give them emotional support.

LaVerne Skinner, Outreach director, said she often reads people's mail for them. "Some people I visit are totally blind or legally blind and they cannot read their mail, or sometimes they get mail they do not understand."

Skinner said she often picks up food stamps, prescriptions and other necessities. During one day, Skinner helped a woman who was ill find someone to clean her home. She also visited a woman she had helped in the past, just to see how she was doing.

Skinner said one thing most of the people she visits have in common is poverty.

"Most of the elderly are simply living on well below a poverty income," she said. "Some make as low as \$175 to \$200 per month."

Furthermore Skinner said many of the low-income people she visits are black. "They (blacks)

have worked hard all their lives, usually keeping someone else's house and raising someone else's kids, and many of their employers didn't withhold social security."

One woman Skinner visits, Pearl Bell, is 81 years old. Besides keeping her tiny, weathered old house clean, and growing a garden of roses, verbenas and amaryllis, she takes care of her nephew, Earl Brown, who is an out-patient at Brazos Valley Mental Health-Mental Retardation Center.

Bell first met Skinner when she was trying to get financial aid for Brown. With Skinner's help, Brown is now receiving \$390 per month, which may be used only for his medical expenses. Bell receives \$226.70 per month from social security payments. Her late husband was a janitor at Texas A&M 15 years ago.

Pearl said she tries not to go to the grocery store too often, because of the distance and the trouble it takes to get there. "When you go to get food, it's way up yonder," she said.

By sticking to foods like chicken, beans, rice, grits and coffee,

Bell is able to keep her food bill down to about \$70 per month (for the two of them). Much of her monthly income is used on her electricity bill. She said her light bill was as high as \$85 during last winter.

Bell says she has learned to survive on what she has and doesn't complain. "I do very well," she said. "The things I don't need I leave alone."

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If houses are irreparable, or in need of more repair than the weatherization program can afford, Barnard said they refer the home owners to the local Housing and Urban Development offices, which can spend up to \$10,000 on each home. They also refer them



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