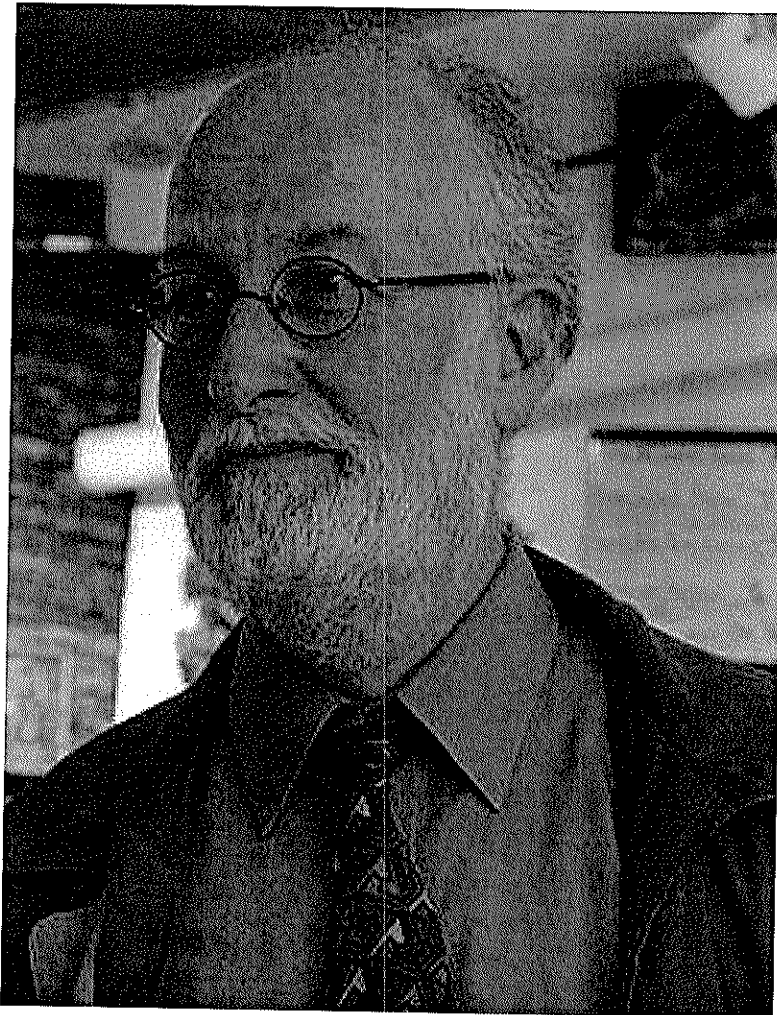


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FEATURED

## County receives \$76k for water bill assistance

By Fred Kight Jan 27, 2019



Mayor's Partnership for Progress President Gary Goosman. He's also Amesville's mayor.

Athens County is receiving about \$76,000 for emergency water assistance. The money will be given to low-income residents faced with the loss of water service to their homes.

Area officials welcome the funding but point out it's a drop in the bucket compared to hundreds of millions of dollars for assistance to low-income people that the state has declined to release.

The water assistance is a new program being administered locally by Hocking Athens Perry Community Action. Spokeswoman Jessica Stroh said her agency will start accepting telephone calls for appointments for the Community Services Block Grant on Feb. 1.

"HAPCAP has \$129,368 available to help up to 600 households in Hocking, Athens and Perry Counties," said Stroh. "The Water Bill Assistance Program is a one-time benefit where up to \$200 will be pledged directly to the water company to pay the bill, late fees, reconnect fees, or other items on the bill that are required to continue service for at least 30 days. Additional items may include sewer charges or current and past bill amounts.

To qualify for assistance, households must meet certain income criteria.

They must "be at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, and the water bill must be in the process of disconnect or already in shut-off status," Stroh said. "The water bill also must be in the name of an eligible adult household member."

To make an appointment, call 1-800-686-1093 or 740-767-4500 and ask for the Water Bill Assistance Program staff.

The money awarded to Community Action is part of a grant totaling \$500,000 going to 13 Appalachian counties in Ohio. It was Ohio's answer to a request more than a year ago for \$12 million – \$8 million to prevent water shutoffs and \$4 million to purchase essential items such as diapers, feminine-hygiene products, first-aid supplies and over-the-counter medications.

That request on behalf of their constituents was submitted by the Mayors' Partnership for Progress, a bipartisan group of mayors and city managers from Athens and 14 other counties. (While 15 counties are represented by the group, just 13 were involved when the water grant was awarded.)

The mayors were hoping the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services would be willing to spend some of the money that had been piling up in a federal block grant account for cash assistance. This TANF account now has a balance of more than \$600 million.

Instead of being distributed, the money has accumulated as the number of poor but ineligible people has substantially increased in Ohio in recent years. They were disqualified as work requirements became harder to meet.

The question of what will happen with that \$600-plus million now falls to a new group of officials at the ODJFS, ones appointed by newly installed Gov. Mike DeWine.

Mayors' Partnership President (and Amesville Mayor) Gary Goosman said he expects his group will renew its call for assistance for some of Ohio's poorest residents.

"We do, indeed, intend to continue to seek TANF dollars (of) which the state has a large surplus," said Goosman. "We're working on our position paper for 2019 for the new administration."

How much they'll ask for is not known, but the position paper and a statement about priorities should be finished by February.

Asked about TANF spending, ODJFS spokesman Bret Crow said, "It's premature to discuss plans for this funding, since a formal request hasn't been submitted yet."

The \$76,446 allotted to Athens County for the Water Bill Assistance Program is the largest of the 13 counties.

“They allocated the funding based on the number of residents at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level,” said Stroh. “Athens County has the highest percentage of all of the 13 counties so that is why we are getting a higher allocation than other counties.”

The grant is expected to serve 382 Athens County households, just a small fraction of the potential need. More than 17,000 households are considered to be living in poverty, according to the Ohio Development Services Agency.