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For Immediate Release

Date: February 13, 2007

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Annual Walk for Warmth to Benefit Local Families Struggling to Pay Home-Energy Costs

Ottawa County – The Ottawa County Community Action Agency (CAA) is hosting the 17th Annual Walk for Warmth on Saturday, February 17 at the Holland Civic Center. The walk began in 1986. Tim Kurtz, director of a local Community Action Agency in Michigan, visited a family who was without heat. He found them in a smoke-filled home. A fire was burning in an old tin tub in the middle of the living room. A fan had been placed in a window to draw out the smoke. Out of compassion, he walked the cold streets in his hometown for 24 hours to experience what it was like to be without heat. He carried a sign that read, “Helping the Poor in 24.” Since that time, the annual walk continues to raise funds to assist with emergency utility needs in several counties in Michigan through out the year. Benefactors of Walk for Warmth funds include those with disabilities, the elderly, children, and the working poor.

“Families and individuals become vulnerable when they must choose between paying for heat in the winter or buying groceries,” says Susan Cervantes, Program Supervisor of CAA. “Children under the age of three are especially vulnerable in these circumstances. A recent study published in Pediatrics found that babies and toddlers in impoverished homes gained less weight than those in other homes immediately following the winter season.”

The study, “Heat or Eat: The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program & Nutritional Health Risks Among Children Less than 3 Years Old”, published in November, 2006, evaluated 7000 low-income families from 1998 to 2004 in five U.S. cities. A link was found between the ability to pay for utility services and childhood development and health. Impoverished families who must choose between spending their resources on food or spending to prevent a utility shut off, may choose to survive on less food. A utility shut off may result in homelessness. The November, 2006 Pediatric study also found that, “In the United States, data show that families reporting unheated days or threats of utility turnoff are more likely to report that their children were hungry or at risk for hunger than families without either experience.”

Children living in households receiving energy assistance are less likely to be undernourished, suffer from childhood obesity or undergo hospitalization due to illness or disease. 211 of Ottawa County reports that between July 1 and September 30, 2006 the second most requested service was utility bill payment assistance. During the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006, CAA spent \$168,684.00 on utility assistance for 797 households. The average payment for utility assistance was \$212.00.

All funds raised through the Walk for Warmth will be used to assist Ottawa County residents. Individuals and groups may join the Walk for Warmth. To locate a pledge sheet or for more information visit miottawa.org/caa, call 393-5615 or e-mail rhooley@co.ottawa.mi.us. It is the mission of the Ottawa County Community Action Agency to reduce the effects of poverty in Ottawa County by promoting self-sufficiency and economic independence. Auxiliary aids available upon request to individuals with disabilities. CAA is an equal opportunity employer/program.