

AFTERMATH OF TERROR
SPECIAL PAGE

FEMA's Aid Offering Is News To Many Eligible New Yorkers

By **CHRISTINE B. WHELAN**
Staff Reporter of **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**
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On a sticky Sunday morning at a P.C. Richard & Son appliance store in downtown Manhattan, Grace Gargano shopped for an air conditioner. Her old unit broke a few weeks after Sept. 11, overwhelmed by dust wafting into her apartment about 20 blocks from Ground Zero, but she sweated through much of the summer, waiting for prices to drop.

Ms. Gargano, 68 years old, probably needn't have waited, because the Federal Emergency Management Agency is giving away money for air conditioners, air purifiers and vacuum cleaners to any New York City household exposed to World Trade Center fallout. Yet hardly anybody knows that.

"It was never mentioned to me. Why didn't I know about this?" says Ms. Gargano.

Little Publicity

The program is administered by the New York State Department of Labor's Individual Family Grant office. All of the five boroughs' 3.2 million households are eligible for as much as \$1,550 in

cleaning and cooling equipment, but New Yorkers so far have claimed only 570 air conditioners, 2,821 air purifiers and 1,489 vacuum cleaners -- mostly in Manhattan. The state covers 25% of the cost -- \$2 million to date -- and FEMA pays the rest.

"It's outrageous we haven't gotten any information about this. It's the best-kept secret the government has," says Bronx Councilman Larry Seabrook, one of several local lawmakers who hadn't heard of the giveaway. He says he has had numerous constituents complaining about respiratory problems they blame on the 9/11 dust, but he didn't know what to tell them.

Robert Lillpop, a state Labor Department spokesman, says ads in major New York newspapers in multiple languages publicize 9/11 grant programs in general, but none specifically mention this one.

Giving Generously

With the few applicants who have heard of it, FEMA has been exceedingly generous. "We have been very liberal in granting reimbursements," says James McIntyre, FEMA's New York spokesman, declining to outline specific guidelines. "We're looking at this on a case-by-case basis."

So a Park Avenue multimillionaire would be considered, as would a Bronx resident 17 miles from Ground Zero -- even though the federal Environmental Protection Agency has concluded that the city's outside air quality is back to where it was and offers free cleanups only for apartments below Canal Street. In fact, the EPA uses apartments above 78th Street as clean control samples when testing how the attacks affected lower Manhattan's indoor-air quality.

Some entrepreneurs have started to take notice of FEMA's generosity and are profiting off it, including David Libman, an

enterprising New York University graduate student who lives on 97th Street and Broadway.

"I had a black layer of soot in my apartment," he says. "Is that from 9/11? I don't know, but I would wake up with a runny nose and I wanted to do something about it." A friend showed him a flyer about the program, and he successfully applied for money for an air purifier and vacuum cleaner. Finding the application process confusing, he set up an informational Website, www.911cleanair.com, and then began selling air purifiers himself.

Wasteful to Some

At P.C. Richard, sales personnel are well versed in the FEMA offerings and are ready to give needy customers the agency's toll-free number (800-462-9029). "I'll tell them about the program if I see somebody who struggles," says salesman Martin Djambazov. "I'll tell people from Brooklyn and Queens, too. Everybody gets excited. It definitely helps our business. Everyone buys the most expensive vacuum. Before they'd buy the cheapest."

Other vendors have set up additional Web sites about the program, including www.allergybegone.com and www.cleanairprogram.com, and are plastering mailboxes and newspaper machines with posters that encourage New Yorkers to take advantage of the program to buy new air conditioners, vacuum cleaners and air purifiers. FEMA says residents should apply before buying, just to be safe.

All this strikes some government watchdogs as a bit wasteful. "You catch a cold, see dust in the house and then call FEMA? I'm wondering about all the other more important things the government could be working on to actually save lives," says Tom Schatz, president of Washington-based Citizens Against Government Waste.

New York State Sen. Liz Krueger, a Democrat who represents the East Side above 14th Street, disagrees. "There was a significant impact to the air quality from that smoke, even uptown," she says. "I would encourage all my constituents to make the call to FEMA and apply."

Write to Christine B. Whelan at christine.whelan@dowjones.com