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## Prices are up, and the heat's on

### Can agencies, officials, utilities find ways to help poor families pay?

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The waiting room at Charlotte's Crisis Assistance Ministry is already packed with families looking for help, and it's not even cold yet.

This winter is shaping up to be a frightening one for community groups such as Crisis Assistance, which helps families stave off utility disconnects and evictions.

Demand for their services is sure to increase, with heating costs expected to reach record levels. Natural gas heating bills in Charlotte for the average family could be \$60 to \$90 higher per month over last year, according to Piedmont Natural Gas Co. Inc.

Now, community groups, governors and utility companies are lobbying Capitol Hill to increase appropriations for the federal program that helps poor people cover their heating bills.

About \$2.2 billion is slated to go to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, this year, about the same as last year. Overall heating costs, meanwhile, are expected to be almost 80 percent higher, according to the federal Energy Information Administration.

"The problem is that \$2.2 billion will not do it in any way, shape or form," said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association.

The recently passed Energy Policy Act says LIHEAP can be funded up to \$5.1 billion annually.

One attempt at boosting appropriations led by Sen. John Kerry has already failed, shot down last week. No Carolinas senators sponsored that effort. Kerry has vowed to keep trying, and other groups have their own attempts to find additional appropriations.

Twenty-eight governors from around the country, including N.C. Gov. Mike Easley but not S.C. Gov. Mark Sanford, sent a letter to congressional leaders asking for an emergency \$1.3 billion appropriation for LIHEAP.

Some advocates handicap the chances of getting more funding at 50-50, as they try to convince fiscal conservatives already perturbed by federal spending.

Adding money is a way to help low-income families across the board, advocates argue. The federal government doesn't have as easy a vehicle to help people cover the rising cost of gasoline, said George Coling, executive director of the National Fuel Funds, which is lobbying for more LIHEAP funds on behalf of groups such as Crisis Assistance.

"It's really the only thing Congress can do with existing law to give people additional purchasing power," he said.

State governments in the Carolinas, meanwhile, say they can't do much, as their budgets are already strapped. "We're going to have to go to some kind of Plan B," said Joel Sawyer, spokesman for Sanford. "The funding we have for this is totally dependent on the federal government."

Only a few states have their own low-income heating programs; neither of the Carolinas do.

Piedmont Natural Gas is one of the voices calling for more money for the federal program, which is funded by tax dollars. The Charlotte company this year contributed \$250,000 to local low-income energy assistance programs in its three-state service territory, a fivefold increase over last year.

Community groups that depend on the federal program's money, such as Crisis Assistance, are trying to realign their budgets for the winter.

"At this moment, we are the most stretched," said Carol Hughes, the chief executive.

The group has had a rough year, from helping families cover air-conditioning bills this boiling summer to spending an unanticipated \$100,000 to help Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Charlotte. The hurricane damaged natural-gas infrastructure in the Gulf area, pushing up the wholesale price.

Crisis Assistance now is limiting families to a maximum of \$100 per visit from its main cash fund, the one with the least restrictions on usage. Without help, it will likely have to cut that ration deeper or turn more people away, officials said.

That provides little solace for families already struggling to pay their bills. Jennifer Griffin, a mother of three in Charlotte, said she has already cut all the fat from her budget: no more weekend drives across town to visit relatives, no more video-game rentals to reward her sons for good grades in school.

"I fear that (energy) prices are going up and up, and there's nothing anybody's doing about it," she said last week while waiting to ask for Crisis Assistance Ministry's help with her overdue \$650 electric bill.

### **The Pinch on PNG**

Piedmont Natural Gas Co. Inc. winces, too, when the price of natural gas gets high.

The company pays for the higher wholesale cost of natural gas, which it passes onto consumers. That leads customers to use less natural gas, which cuts into the company's bottom line.

As a regulated monopoly, state officials limit its profit margin. The company reported \$95.2 million in net income last fiscal year, which ended Oct. 31, 2004, up from \$74.4 million the previous year.

The company has 960,000 customers across the Carolinas and Tennessee.