

Applicants for federal energy assistance more than doubled

By KATIE PETERSON

JEFFERSON CITY — The number of Missourians seeking help to pay their energy bills has more than doubled compared to this time last year, said Central Missouri Community Action Agency Services Director Angela Hirsch.

There are 37,485 applicants statewide for the federal energy assistance program compared to last year's 17,166 applicants, according to Hirsch.

In the central Missouri agency, an eight-county area including Boone County, cases for assistance rose from 1,000 by November 2004 to 2,350 current applicants.

The Missouri Community Action Agency administers the Low Income Housing Energy Assistance Program offices in every county.

Elaine West, executive director of the Missouri Association for Community Action, said higher natural gas rates and a growing concern about an energy crisis have caused the increase.

"People are really worried, people are fearful that they won't make enough to get through the winter," West said.

Hirsch said Missouri's changing population has also contributed to the increase in applicants.

"Another part of it is that we are seeing more low-income families and more of the elderly seeking assistance for their energy costs. We are also seeing a surge in our population from families coming here from hurricane-affected areas who are seeking assistance," Hirsch said.

To qualify for assistance, applicants have to meet certain guidelines. Hirsch said applicants' income has to be at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level. This percentage depends on the number of individuals living in the household and their monthly income.

West said the federal budget has not been passed, so the amount of money granted to the energy assistance program is yet to be determined. The amount of the grant is limited and is not guaranteed to cover all applicants.

"There are tons of individuals that need assistance with their utility bills and we are expecting the need to far exceed the LIHEAP grant," West said.

Liz Hagar-Mace, chairwoman of Gov. Matt Blunt's Committee to End Homelessness fears the rising utility rates will push low-income Missourians out of their homes. Hagar-Mace said the higher number of people seeking assistance early in the heating season is particularly alarming.

"If a person's utilities are shut off, that becomes unsafe housing and the resident can lose their home," Hagar-Mace said.

Hirsch recommends residents concerned about their ability to pay their bill download an application from the Missouri Department of Social Services Web site at www.dss.mo.gov or contact their local action agency at www.communityaction.org to have an application mailed to them. If a resident is at risk or has had their utilities terminated, they should directly contact their

local agency. People in Boone County needing help should contact Columbia office at 443-8731.