

# CENTRE DAILY Times

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## **Left out in the cold** **Soaring energy prices, frigid temperatures set to collide**

By Chris Rosenblum

Even though John Glasgow locked in his heating oil deliveries long ago, he found rising prices chilling enough to choose an alternative.

Glasgow recently had a coal stove installed in his home near Millheim, in addition to the furnace that heats his water. And he bought a stainless steel chimney liner for a better draw and more warmth.

"It was a no-brainer after the price of oil hit almost \$2 a gallon," Glasgow said. "It was an easy decision."

Others may face a tougher call -- what to do without in order to keep from freezing. High fuel costs, coupled with forecasts of a frigid season, have social service agencies and charities already springing into action to help lower-income and other at-risk homeowners stay warm this winter.

According to the federal Energy Information Administration, households that heat with oil can plan on spending on average \$378 more than last year, a 32 percent jump. Those using natural gas face an average increase of \$350, or 48 percent. Propane costs will rise 30 percent.

"I think we're going to see more and more people needing help," said Barb Simcisko, executive director of FaithCentre, a private nonprofit service organization in Bellefonte. "They're going to have to make a choice. 'Do I buy food? Do I buy fuel?' I think it's going to be a difficult winter."

From a meteorological standpoint, forecasters at Ferguson Township-based AccuWeather think so. They're calling for "significantly colder than average" temperatures in the Northeast, which could lead to homeowners in the region paying almost 50 percent more for heating oil than they did last winter.

Their predictions could mean trouble for Francis Phillips.

Phillips, 86, lives on a fixed income in Bellefonte. She has been trying to pay off her heating oil bill from last year so her supplier will make another delivery.

If Phillips can't square it away before Nov. 7 -- when the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program kicks in -- she'll have to get by with turning on her electric stove and relying on her nephew to bring five gallons of fuel each week.

Even with LIHEAP benefits, which haven't increased, Phillips won't be able to buy as much oil this year. She's not sure what will happen.

"I'll have to handle it as it comes," she said. "Maybe we'll do it as we're doing now, just five gallons at a time."

Bob Ott worries about people like Phillips.

Ott, the county director of adult services, said the elderly are particularly endangered by the heating-fuel price surge because their thermostats are often set higher for health reasons and because they're usually reluctant to seek help.

"In a few cases last year, older people were wearing coats inside their apartments because they were trying to conserve what little fuel they had left," he said.

Ott and others in the area social services network are so anxious about the upcoming season that they recently activated the local Heating Assistance TaskForce after a two-year hiatus.

Formed in 2002 by multiple agencies and groups but mothballed over mild winters, the task force convened weeks earlier than during its first year.

"Knowing we're facing a potentially horrific and deadly heating season, we wanted to quickly activate and gather information," said Ott, the task force chairman.

Among other options, the task force might explore "nontraditional sources of heating assistance funds" should a heating crisis drain existing accounts.

Presently, the \$1 Energy Fund Grant Program established with utility companies provides help with electric and gas terminations for households at or below 200 percent of federal poverty income guidelines. That equates to \$38,700 for a family of four.

Charity groups such as Interfaith Mission, FaithCentre, Catholic Social Services, St. Vincent DePaul Society and Salvation Army also supply heating assistance.

Ott said one avenue might involve agencies requesting additional United Way funds or local or county government money. Establishing shelters is unlikely because of the high expense, he said.

Already, Interfaith Mission and FaithCentre -- both of which have received calls for assistance far in advance of the heating season -- have tried to increase their coffers.

"We've asked for special donations from our congregations," said Matt Hall, Interfaith executive director.

He fears that the double whammy of high gasoline and fuel oil prices might overwhelm some working-poor families who could have skated by in better times.

"I anticipate we're going to get a lot more calls from people who never used services before," he said.

Simcisko, at FaithCenter, shares the concern.

Two weeks ago, she sent a letter to 50 local churches and business requesting contributions to the group's Needy Assistance program that could be used for heating. So far, she's received just \$200.

"One client came in today, and he makes \$16,000," Simcisko said. "He's making it now, but if he has a high electric bill, he's not going to do it."

The situation has convinced some homeowners to seek other choices. Local sellers of wood, pellet and coal stoves report increased sales this fall. Hank Taylor, of Pennwood Corp. in Pleasant Gap, said his installation crews are booked for the next six weeks, far earlier than last year.

"I think the high cost of fossil fuel has driven the sale of solid fuels," Taylor said. "People don't want to be dependent on one fuel now."

With the price of heating oil recently hitting \$2.54 a gallon -- up 60 percent from last year -- local fuel vendors pledge to work as much as possible with customers to provide service. Nittany Oil general manager Jim Scott said he's never seen such high prices, though he expects a drop.

"What comes up eventually comes down," he said, blaming the spike on speculators flooding the commodities market.

Brandon Duff, a customer service representative at Centre Oil and Gas, expects more people than usual will fall behind in their bill payments. And that might mean more people turning to LIHEAP.

The federal program provides eligible homeowners with both cash grants to utility and fuel companies and crisis support in the form of a one-time payment of up to \$300. Administered by the Centre County Assistance Office and Central Pennsylvania Community Action, the benefits aided 2,157 households in Centre County last year.

But social-service workers worry that because LIHEAP benefits haven't kept pace with fuel prices, even emergency heating aid might not be enough to buy a minimum delivery.

Four Democratic state senators have jointly sponsored a resolution calling on Congress to give Pennsylvania more LIHEAP money than the \$120 million it's slated to receive. Don Limbaugh, executive director of the Centre County Assistance Office, isn't going to hold his breath.

"We're hoping something else comes along to supplement the allowances, but there's never any guarantee, especially in a climate of tight budgets," he said.

Pennsylvania, according to the Democratic lawmakers, is the only state in the Northeast Corridor that doesn't supplement its LIHEAP allocation. State Sen. Jake Corman, R-Benner Township, wants to change that. He has sent Gov. Ed Rendell a letter urging that the state tap into its Rainy Day Fund to increase its LIHEAP funds by 40 percent.

Other state senators have introduced legislation to add as much as \$80 million in state funds to LIHEAP.

Corman said legislators will make heating assistance a top priority when they're back in session this week. It's not certain what the winter will bring, but he wants to be prepared for the worst.

"It's hard to say," Corman said, "but that's why we should be out in front of it and not wait until we have an emergency."