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Will it be food or fuel this winter?

Some families might have to make the choice

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On cold winter nights, Roberto Herrera would turn off the heat, and he and his mother, 86, would wear mittens to bed. They're both on Social Security and heat is expensive.

This winter, with higher gas and oil prices, Herrera won't be able to pay his bill, the Harrisburg man said yesterday, speaking through an interpreter.

The Energy Department's latest forecast said heating bills would rise as much as 50 percent from last winter. Those who heat with natural gas face the sharpest increases.

"This is going to be a heck of a winter," said Melvin T. Johnson, board chairman of the Fair Housing Council of the Capital Region Inc.

Johnson has heard from landlords who will leave their apartments vacant rather than pay heat costs, as well as from tenants whose landlords handed out electric space heaters rather than turn on the heat.

The outlook is grim at best, said David Fox, executive director of the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, a coalition of human service organizations, energy industry trade associations and utilities.

"They're talking about a 48 percent increase in natural gas, 32 percent for fuel oil and 30 percent for propane," Fox said. "With cost increases like that on top of already record-high prices for natural gas, it's going to be a struggle even for middle-income households to pay the bills this winter. For low-income houses, it could simply be devastating."

Some people will have to choose from among heat, food and medication, said Amy Mountain, a spokeswoman for the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Many senior citizens' situations could become dire this winter, she said.

Barbara Welliver-Bramer said record numbers of people came to the Perry County Food Bank in September.

"Winter is always a difficult time for people who don't have a good, comfortable income, but I'm really concerned that it will be worse this year," she said. "It's not just the cost of fuel, it's home heating fuel and the cost of food. Something's got to give."

A new state law makes it easier for utilities to cut off nonpaying customers.

Bobbie Jo Scharadin vowed to keep her heat off until Nov. 1. She's worried about the cost of keeping her four children warm in their rented Harrisburg house.

The other side of her duplex is vacant, the windows are from 1950 and there are hollow spots in her basement. "That means many air leaks," she said.

Other years, she'd turn the thermostat up to 68 degrees, she said. This year, 65 is tops. Her children already are getting colds, she said.

She'll try to put plastic over the windows and apply weather stripping, but she can't afford the supplies right now, she said. She noted that landlords do not have to weatherize units.

Some landlords are adding a fuel surcharge to rents, said Jim Pressley, a landlord-tenant counselor at the Fair Housing Council of the Capital Region. Others have told tenants to expect one tank of oil a month.

One landlord handed his tenants two space heaters and said, "This will take care of your heating for the winter," said Pressley, who expects to see more house fires this year. "Six units with space heaters sounds very dangerous to me."