



# No warmth in utility's service

Needy not being told how to avert shutoffs

By DAN GERINGER  
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LIKE THOUSANDS of impoverished Philadelphians, 65-year-old Bessie Archer is facing a winter without home heating because the Philadelphia Gas Works has shut off her service.

She feels the chill creeping into her North Philadelphia rowhouse and wonders how she and the two teenaged boys she cares for - a grandson and a foster son - will get through the coming winter.

"It's getting cold in here," Archer said.

PGW is demanding that she repay \$1,300 in back bills before it restores service, she said.

"Where am I going to get \$1,300?"

Archer asked in a voice worn thin by profound sadness, then answered her own question with a hopeless sigh. Nowhere.

Her husband died last spring after a long battle with cancer, leaving her with first and second mortgages and a stack of bills to pay out of her government disability check.

Archer said that as she fell behind in her monthly payments, PGW never told her that she was eligible for its Customer Responsibility Program (CRP).

CRP halves the average gas bill for customers living at or just above the poverty line by charging them a low, fixed percentage of their income, regardless of skyrocketing natural-gas prices.

Archer finally found out about CRP when she turned to the grassroots Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) for help.

"But it was either pay the two mortgages or pay the PGW utility bill and lose my home," Archer said. "I sent \$50, \$60 a month, whatever

I could afford, to PGW, but I just fell further behind.

"Now, they want \$1,300 to turn the service back on. I told them I don't have it. I don't know what I'm going to do. I got a bad heart. I'm a diabetic. And I'm cold."

Community Legal Services attorney Jonathan M. Stein is accusing PGW - which admits to enrolling only half of its 120,000 eligible ratepayers in CRP - of putting thousands of low-income customers at risk by not telling them about bill-slashing CRP assistance that could prevent their heat from being shut off this winter.

"PGW customer-service reps are really collection agents, trained to get that last little ounce of blood from customers," Stein said.

"As a low-income customer, you have no leverage. The PGW mentality is that if you're behind in your bills, you're a deadbeat, and the company's marching orders are to get as much money out of you as possible," he said.

"If I use the fact that you may die from freezing this winter, I can get you to say 'yes' to any payment plan I offer, even if it's much higher than you should be paying and much higher than you can afford to pay."

But Steven P. Hershey, vice president of community initiatives at the city-owned gas works, which heats 420,000 city homes, said, "The idea that PGW would rather wring a few dollars out of people than refer them to an assistance program is offensive.

"Jonathan [Stein] doesn't know diddly about PGW," Hershey said. "He may be relying on some anecdotal evidence where perhaps a customer-service person screwed up and did not give the right information.

"Anytime anybody calls and says, 'I'm having trouble with my payments' or 'I got a shutoff notice,' our customer-service people are trained to inquire about income and get as many eligible people as possible into CRP."

Hershey said gas service has been shut off to 16,000 people. Although he expects that number to decrease in November, when federally funded LIHEAP [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program] payments begin, there will still be 5,000-10,000 customers without service going into winter.

"Some of those families use another form of heat, such as kerosene," Hershey said. "We inform the Fire Department because of the danger."

He said PGW was so concerned about assistance-eligible customers that it hired ACORN, a community-based activist group with a long track record of fighting for low-income families, to knock on doors last year and spread the word about bill-paying help.

"ACORN is trusted in low-income neighborhoods," Hershey said. "People might not open the door for someone in a PGW uniform, but they will open the door to an ACORN worker."

But ACORN organizer Ali Kronley said, "It is frustrating that PGW is using that very limited program as an example of real outreach in the community because it wasn't.

"PGW gave us a list of people who had been shut off and asked us to track those people down, find out how many were eligible for customer assistance and get them to contact PGW.

"There were a lot of dead-ends, a lot of houses where no one lived. We found 40 or 50 people. That was our whole effort."

Real outreach, Kronley said, would consist of "an aggressive door-to-door campaign, where trained folks knock on doors,

then sit down on people's couches and have financial conversations with them about budget planning and assistance programs that would answer the question: 'How do we create a customer who can afford to pay this utility bill?'

"In our daily contact with folks in the neighborhoods," she said, "we haven't discovered anyone who found out about available bill-paying assistance when they called PGW about a financial problem."

"I never heard of PGW's financial-assistance program before I came to ACORN for help," said S.J., an Olney man who spoke on condition of anonymity, saying he is ashamed that after a lifetime of working security and retail-management jobs at two of the city's major museums, he now lives in daily fear of PGW terminating his service for nonpayment.

S.J., who had a stroke earlier this year, supports his 16-year-old granddaughter and his wife, who also suffered a stroke, on his \$1200-a-month disability check.

"I've been to PGW three times about my bills," he said. "I brought proof of income and proof of disability. Nobody mentioned any kind of program other than, 'How much can you pay?' They put me on a budget plan that I can't afford. When my bills piled up, they threatened to shut me off. Any day now, they will."

S.J. stopped talking because he was sobbing. It took him awhile to regain his composure.

"I worked two jobs most of my life, but nobody wants to hire a 65-year-old man with a heart condition," he said. "I am ashamed that I am sitting here helpless, afraid of being shut off any day now, waiting for the gas company to knock on the door.

"It used to be that they couldn't cut you off in winter and let you freeze to death," he said. "Now, they can."