



Clovis, New Mexico
October 24, 2005

Heating costs forcing some seniors to look at alternatives

By Marlena Hartz: CNJ staff writer

A wood stove and closed doors. These are the ways one aging couple will fight the chill of winter.

Richard and Marie Jamieson try to cut costs any way they can. When a cold front lingers, they fire up the woodstove they bought last year, instead of turning on the propane. They heat only the heart of their home, keeping the doors to other rooms shut. Despite National Weather Service projections of a warmer than average winter, the Jamiesons are worried their conservative habits won't be enough.

According to the Department of Energy, the cost of home heating could increase by two-fold this winter. It is a major threat to the lifestyles of many seniors on fixed incomes, combined with increasing Medicare and fluctuating gas costs.

"There's not much the common man can do," Richard Jamieson said from his rural home.

Jamieson, 74, has worked all of his life. He continues to work as a janitor two days a week; without the extra money, he would not be able to pay for the medication he needs to make his hands stop shaking, a symptom of Parkinson's disease. His knees are replaced with metal implants and his hearing is not so good anymore.

"I feel tired. I am an old man. I'm broken down," Jamieson said.

For Jamieson, retirement is a luxury he can't afford. He doesn't dwell on dreams of golf-course frolicking or cruise trips, he just wants to be able to buy his medicine, go grocery shopping, and heat his home.

Pleas for financial aid from senior citizens have increased by almost half at the La Casa Senior Family Center, according to center director Josie Marez.

"Some seniors can't afford to get to doctor's appointments or go grocery shopping. Financially, many have the very lowest income status. They are affected tremendously (by cost of living fluctuations). Some are already enrolled in assistance programs, but they are now looking for more assistance," Marez said.

There is help available — the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (known as LIHEAP), La Casa indigent health programs, and welfare are a few options, Marez said. But many seniors are too proud to voice their needs, or too exasperated to fill out the corresponding reams of paperwork, according to many who work with them.

"A lot of (seniors) don't like to admit they are having a bad time," said Martha Blais, a

66-year-old Senior Community Service Employment Program employee who links other seniors to jobs at non-profit organizations.

Although Social Security check amounts are slated to increase, it does little to calm financial fears among seniors, Walkabout said. The boost could disqualify some seniors from assistance eligibility, Walkabout said.

“You hate to see old people without the things they need, with such fragile health and all,” Walkabout said.

She said many of her clients can do nothing but hold their breath and wait to see how changes in government programs and the economy will affect them.

Those who dangle at the lowest income levels are already being “mashed,” said AARP vice president Harold Burris.

“They are really being pinched,” Burris said.