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## 180,000 Iowans cannot afford energy bills

**More than 180,000 bills - 60,000 more than the population of Cedar Rapids - have gone unpaid.**

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As William Basham calculated his family's finances recently, he reached a frightening conclusion. There was no way to cover both the utility bill and the rent.

Basham, who is disabled, is one of thousands of Iowans whose power was cut off this fall for not paying utility bills. He applied for the state's heating assistance program, but he said the one-time grant will go only so far.

"I'll have to take all the rent (money) to keep the electric on," said Basham, 36, who uses electric heaters in the Des Moines house he shares with his girlfriend and three children.

The state's energy assistance program opens today for all qualified applicants. The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, has been open to elderly and disabled people since Oct. 1. With rising energy prices eating into the budgets of low- and fixed-income households, energy assistance officials expect even more applicants will seek help this year.

"We are definitely seeing a fear among clients that wasn't there in past years because of the high fuel prices," said Marci Rafdal, acting community services administrator for Des Moines.

The Iowa Utilities Board projects that natural gas bills will be between 36 percent and 50 percent higher than last year. For October, MidAmerican Energy charged residential customers about double the rate charged a year ago: \$1.21 per therm, which is about 100 cubic feet of gas.

Jerry McKim, director of the state's Bureau of Energy Assistance, said it's too early to predict the demand for assistance. But he said the number of applicants has increased about 4 percent each of the last four years.

Last winter, 85,678 households received help. Even if the number of households tops 90,000 this year, that's less than half of the estimated 200,000 Iowa households eligible for the program.

The amount awarded to Basham and other recipients is determined by a point system that calculates income, household size and housing type, among other factors. McKim has kept the point system unchanged so the average benefit per household will be \$317, the same as last year. But with higher energy prices, that same benefit counts for less, McKim said.

Basham qualified for a \$319 grant. He has received energy assistance for three years. Besides a chronic kidney condition, he also suffers from sleep and muscle disorders. Unable to work, he has resorted to selling personal items, such as tools. But he said he did not have enough money to cover his energy bills, which led to the shut-off of his utilities. He's been without power for a week.

One indication that requests for help will increase is the rising number of unpaid bills. Through September, the number of past-due accounts among all Iowa households was 180,426 - the highest total McKim has recorded in six years, and a figure that's 60,000 higher than the population of Cedar Rapids. Of that total, 22,699 accounts belonged to households eligible for energy assistance, a 52.4 percent increase over last September. Iowa utilities issued 78,722 disconnection notices in September, a 28.4 percent increase compared with last year. There were 5,390 involuntary disconnections in September, a 13.6 percent increase over 2004.

Basham said he'll scrape together enough money to cover his energy bill. But he must now find another way to pay the rent. After today, he'll be protected from another shut-off this winter. Iowa law prohibits shut-offs against LIHEAP recipients from Nov. 1 to April 1.

Energy assistance officials have their own budget concerns. Until the new federal budget is approved, the program is operating by a "continuing resolution" that keeps funding at last year's level. Last year, Iowa received \$34.5 million in federal money.

Rafdal, of Des Moines community services, said the elderly and disabled lined up nearly every morning in October to sign up for assistance. LIHEAP is a first-come, first-served program.

But Rafdal said assistance money should last through the beginning of the year. "We're not going to serve so many clients that we'll run out of funds the second of November," Rafdal said.