

# IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

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## Not enough help to go around Heating costs to stretch federal assistance

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For the Press-Citizen

Less than two weeks separated Sherri Henderson from a winter moratorium that would shield her home from a power shutoff.

However, despite a payment plan that was supposed to balance her monthly fees, her bills escalated and she couldn't pay her Oct. 15 heating bill, which led to disconnected utilities on Oct. 19.

"Bills keep rising, even on a payment plan. I can't ever get caught up," said Henderson, 46.

Five days later, her utilities were turned back on, but not before she borrowed money for a \$651 payment. She is scheduled to receive help from the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LiHEAP, but she said that money would not overcome the rising costs.

As natural gas prices soar and requests for help with heating increase, there is a growing concern that money to help low-income customers such as Henderson could run out.

Customers will pay an average of \$50 more a month for heating from October through April than the previous year, a 48 percent increase, said Allan Urlis of MidAmerican Energy.

"It's a supply and demand issue," said Urlis, the utility company's media relations director.

Jason Fisher, LiHEAP coordinator for Hawkeye Area Community Action Program, said there are more applicants seeking help this year, "and it's not only the very low income who are having trouble paying their bill.

"It's everyone," he said. "It could be likely that we run out of funds this year because of how many applications we've received."

This year LiHEAP brought \$1.9 million to a six county area -- Johnson, Linn, Washington, Benton, Iowa, and Jones -- down from \$2 million last year. The application period opened to the elderly and disabled Oct. 1, generating more than 2,000 applications compared to 1,500 at this time last year, Fisher said. Open to everyone since Nov. 1, Fisher said he expected to surpass last year's 7,800 applications for help, of which they assisted 7,200 people.

"People who received money last year will likely get what they got last year, but it won't go as far because of higher energy costs," he said.

The moratorium prevents utility companies from turning off delinquent customer's power from Nov. 1 through April 1. However, because the relief allows customers to neglect their energy bill through the winter, it could cause a large balance or utility cancellation when the moratorium ends.

"There will be a lot more people on April 1 who have much larger bills that they can't pay off," Fisher said.

At the Broadway Street Neighborhood Center, 2105 Broadway St., a sign on the front entrance that said "Need help with your heating bill?" reminded people that the application period for LiHEAP began.

Pat Meyer, community development director at the center, helps families find assistance, learn ways to conserve energy and budget their finances so they don't lose power. About 80 families on the street depend on energy assistance, she said.

"You find some people just trying to make it from moratorium to moratorium," Meyer said.

Public housing requires working utilities, so if power was shut off a family could also lose their home, Meyer said.

"The two things most likely to cause homelessness are utility bills or rent," she said, adding that six or seven families have contacted her saying their power was about to be shut off. "It's a snowball effect. Sometimes the bills get so high there is no way to pay them off with the amount of money a person earns."

State Sen. Joe Bolkcom, D-Iowa City, has met with neighborhood center officials about energy assistance.

"There are people still behind in heating bills from last year," Bolkcom said. "We need to start talking about this because there are going to be a lot of people negatively impacted."

MidAmerican Energy also worked to help customers with the rising heating costs.

The utility company offers energy efficiency audits and budget billing, which averages utility bills for a stable monthly payment.

Its I-Care program collects donations, which assists local low-income residents who use MidAmerican.

HACAP distributes the funds, which generated \$70,000 during the past year, according to Jason Fisher. He said HACAP receives funds monthly, but the money is gone in just more than two weeks.

"We try to spread the money around as much as we can, but when it's gone, there isn't much we can do," Fisher said.