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## Powerful gifts

State utilities touting gift certificates for energy bills as practical presents

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With heating costs at record highs this winter, saving energy, not giving it, is on most customers' minds.

Those who can handle rising energy prices can help relatives, friends or neighbors pay the bill by using a gift certificate. By filling out a form on their power company's Web site, customers can pay a portion of a friend's natural gas or electric bill.

Utilities have offered such gift certificates for years, but interest is up this year, sparked by skyrocketing energy costs, said We Energies spokeswoman Beth Martin.

We Energies and other Wisconsin utilities have warned customers to brace for increases in their home heating bills of 40% to 50% this winter. For a typical We Energies customer, that could add \$350 to \$375 during the six-month heating season that continues through the end of April.

"It's really a practical gift," said Scott Smith, a spokesman for Madison-based Alliant Energy Corp. "Everyone's been talking about the increased cost of fuels, and this is a good, practical gift for people to consider."

Martin said customers have been known to give energy gift certificates for Christmas, at Easter, "or as thank-you gifts to neighbors for watching a dog."

Another gift option is to help folks who are having trouble paying their energy bills.

We Energies says people who want to give energy as a gift but don't have a specific person in mind can make a donation to the Keep Wisconsin Warm Fund. That program helps customers whose incomes are too high to qualify for federal heating aid but who are still struggling to afford their payments.