

# CRAIG DAILY PRESS

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## Residents seeking help to stay warm

By Christina M. Currie, Daily Press Writer

Facing a 47 percent increase in the price of natural gas, Angela Reed, 26, decided to leave the heater off this winter.

Instead of relying on the increasingly expensive fuel, she's using coal to heat her house.

"I can't even imagine the cost if we didn't," she said. "It makes a big difference."

The Colorado Public Utilities Commission on Nov. 1 approved Atmos Energy's request to pass on to customers and increase in the cost of natural gas. Although residents won't feel the increase until they get this month's bill, they're flocking to the department of social services to apply for assistance.

Department spokeswoman Laura Willems said she's received 20 percent more Low-income Energy Assistance Program applications this year than she had at this time last year.

"Those may be early applications," she said. "It's hard to say at this point that there's more of a need."

Last year, 430 applications were approved during the November-through-April program cycle. To date, 247 applications have been processed, and Willems estimates there are 50 more to be considered.

The program provides funding assistance for energy bills in as many as two payments. The amount paid depends on several factors,

Willems said, including family size and income. But, there is a \$700 cap per heating season on each family's benefit.

Not many are turned down. In 2004, 47 applications were denied.

"I'm sure a lot of people are struggling," Willems said.

To qualify for the program, the maximum monthly gross income a family of four is limited to \$2,983. For a family of five, the monthly limit is \$3,486.

For more information about the program, call 866-432-8435.

Karen Brown said the Community Budget Center hasn't seen a flood of applications for its energy-assistance program, but she expects to.

"As of now, it hasn't been really cold, and the energy bills for November aren't out yet," she said. "We do anticipate that there will be a rush."

The budget center offers emergency assistance in purchasing natural gas, electricity, propane, firewood and stove pellets.

"We're pretty diverse on what we can do," Brown said.

Applicants must apply for Low-income Energy Assistance Program benefits before coming to the budget center, but not qualifying for those doesn't disqualify them for budget-center assistance.