

# The Sacramento Bee

Sacramento, California  
Sunday, December 4, 2005

## Needy feel chill of heating costs

Help's available to pay bills, but it may not fill the gap fully.

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For one miserable February nearly two years ago, Sheryl Wegner's heat was shut off.

Her poorly insulated trailer was like an icebox. She didn't have hot water. In the middle of a Placerville winter, every bath was an ordeal.

Wegner, 68, receives \$695 a month in Social Security. She ran into trouble in 2004, she said, after she failed to pay her propane bill for several months and it billowed to an unmanageable \$900. This winter, advocates for the poor fear many more people will find themselves in similarly dire straits.

As the first significant snow begins to powder the mountains and cold rains drive down on the Valley, energy prices are on their way up. And up. And up. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. expects local natural gas prices will be up 40 percent over last winter, due to hurricane damage and increasing demand.

In El Dorado County, where most people depend on propane and wood for heat, local propane distributors say prices are 15 percent higher than last year, and some 60 percent or 70 percent above three years ago. The state projects those prices may go even higher as cold weather sets in. Sacramento firewood retailers say their costs have gone up 20 percent to 30 percent in the past year; they have passed along some or all of those costs to consumers. Some are running out of wood.

Programs to help the poor pay their heating bills aren't keeping pace with skyrocketing energy prices. Legislation to increase funding for the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, is stalled in Congress. Even if Congress does

come through, it is unlikely to fund the full \$4.6 billion advocates say will be necessary to protect the nation's poorest residents.

California utility companies have programs to assist the poor with winter heating costs. This year's energy costs are so high those programs will not fully cover low-income clients' needs, said Wendy Wohl, acting director of the California Department of Community Services and Development. Companies that distribute propane and wood say they can't afford to provide any similar relief.

For middle class families, increasing energy prices are making an already difficult financial juggling act even harder. For working class families and people on fixed incomes, officials say price increases may be devastating.

"We're in a crisis situation," Wohl said.

Last winter, with prices rising and temperatures dropping, Sheryl Wegner was getting ready. In order to avoid repeating the miserable scenario of February 2004, she didn't turn on her propane heater for anything except cooking and heating water for bathing. Instead, she'd drag two small electric heaters from one corner of her Placerville mobile home to another. The old trailer has about as much insulation as a cardboard box, Wegner said, so she wore four layers of clothing at all times. She slept with gloves on.

"I can go without heat," she said. "But to go without hot water, that was really horrible."

Last month, she arrived at the El Dorado County senior center, seeking assistance with her propane bill. It was a beautiful fall day, the sky blue, the sun warm, the trees exploding in autumn hues. But Celeste Cooney, who

distributes energy assistance to low-income El Dorado County residents out of that office, knew what was coming.

What was coming was December.

That's the month the county's annual allocation of federal aid runs dry, she said. Already, she'd had to limit help to the most vulnerable: seniors, those with permanent disabilities and families with very young children.

"So if you're 57 and just out of work I'm not able to help you right now," she said.

With all fuel prices up and natural gas prices at record highs, the \$300 annual LIHEAP vouchers cover less than ever. So people cut corners in other ways.

"It's a snowball effect," Cooney said. "They just make do and get sicker. If they're paying for their heating, they're maybe not buying the most nutritious food they should. They don't take their medicine. There's all sorts of things they think of, and not all of them are safe."

The federal government does have a program to help low-income people cover their bills. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program has never reached everyone who needed it, said Richard Kogan, a senior fellow with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, but it does provide a buffer for many needy families. Legislators from cold-weather states have pressured Congress to increase funding for the program in order to keep it commensurate with need -so far to no avail.

Last year, Congress allocated \$2.2 billion for the program. This year, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that at least \$4.6 billion would be necessary in order to serve the 6 million people they believe will apply for the aid. So far, those efforts have stalled at the negotiating table.

"Congress could still act and solve the problem," said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association, "but the clock is running out."

In California, utility companies that distribute natural gas and electricity have programs to help people deal with energy crises. PG&E offers a 20 percent monthly discount to low-income customers, and a \$200 once-a-year

voucher to those with the most dire need. SMUD offers up to a more than 30 percent monthly discount, as well as a bill credit of up to \$200 to some low-income families. Companies that distribute propane and wood are small and unregulated and do not offer subsidies.

Wohl, of the California Department of Community Services and Development, said she is particularly concerned about those who depend on propane and wood.

"There's not a lot of safety for them," she said.

One evening last month, Lorena Ceja sat in the Upper Room soup kitchen in Placerville, coaxing her three children through a meal of ribs and potato salad. Ceja, 33, works as a housekeeper at a local hotel. Her husband works as a driver for a storage company. Combined, they make enough money to pay the \$1,300 rent on their Placerville home -but not enough to heat it.

Last year they bought wood early in the season, when prices were relatively low. But, this year, fear of high fuel prices has driven up demand for wood -and priced out Ceja and her family.

"The money doesn't stretch enough," Ceja said in Spanish. She bundles the children in multiple blankets at night, but the cold seeps through the walls of their poorly insulated brick house. She said she'd never heard of any programs that help with the heating bills.

"We're worried about the winter," she said.

Those who work with the poor are worried, too. They know the dangerous alternative measures people sometimes take to stave off the cold. The California Department of Community Services and Development has issued a pamphlet this year in an attempt to convince people to avoid extreme measures. The pamphlet, which will be distributed in nonprofits and county welfare offices, offers a number of energy-saving tips and warns people not to light barbecues inside their homes or to use ovens as heat sources.

Like many people, 39-year-old Tammy Burnside has already tried the oven trick. She turns it on to try to warm up the drafty south Sacramento apartment she shares with her

2-year-old daughter. The apartment's poor insulation only drives heating costs higher, she said. Burnside, who works in customer service and lives "paycheck to paycheck," fell behind on her energy bills after having major surgery. Eventually, she found her way to the Sacramento Food Bank, where Angelique Keyes helps people who have fallen behind on their SMUD bills.

Keyes said some people come to her office with bills that far exceed their monthly incomes. Many are trying to decide between paying for heat or buying groceries. Others warm water in the microwave because they can afford electricity, but not natural gas for the water heater. Some have been disconnected for weeks.

"I don't know how they pull it together," she said.

Many people seeking help, like 24-year-old Jacquelyn Jones of Fair Oaks, are working. Jones said she felt guilty calling a food bank for help with the bills. Jones and her fiancée both have full-time jobs -she for the Department of Finance, he as a landscaper. But they don't make enough to both pay off a \$400 SMUD bill and cover the emergency dental work her 6-year-old daughter needed last month.

"I'm not that bad off," Jones apologized, sitting in Keyes' office last month with a disconnection letter in her lap.

Keyes nodded as she filled out the emergency paperwork to help with Jones' bill.

"Everybody needs help sometimes," she said.