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Warm heart heats home

By Kevin Woster, Journal Staff Writer

A Rapid City businessman offered Wednesday to pay the propane bill for a financially strapped family in Wanblee who ran out of heat earlier this week.

John Barker, owner of National Automotive Group, urged others in good financial condition going into the winter to do the same.

"There's probably a lot of people out here who could do this," Barker said Wednesday. "I'm doing OK in my business and having a pretty good year. I figured I could help out. And it's a great way to do it, because the money goes straight to the family."

Barker said he would contact PTI Propane in Pine Ridge to set up payment for propane needs at the home of Celeste Pretends Eagle, a single mother with four children. Pretends Eagle and her children share a home with her brother. She also receives help from Sylvester Two Bulls, her children's father, depending on his employment opportunities.

But Pretends Eagle, 25, was unable to pay to refill her empty tank recently, and she and her children twice had to spend nights huddled in a bedroom heated by a single electric heater during subzero cold. PTI Propane in Pine Ridge and assistance programs — including the Community Action Program — in her local district helped to partially re-fill her tank Tuesday. And the Oglala Sioux Tribe's energy-assistance program had her scheduled for an additional gas delivery.

But Pretends Eagle still worried about how she could afford gas for the rest of the winter. Barker said he would be happy to remove that worry.

"There were times when I was growing up that things got pretty tough," the New England native said. "I remember being in the house shivering with the cold while my father went out

to borrow buckets of coal from neighbors. People shouldn't have to be cold, especially children."

The blistering cold that swept across South Dakota last week and kept daytime highs to single digits this week was especially jarring to residents of the impoverished Pine Ridge and other Indian reservations in South Dakota. Local administrators of federally funded assistance programs have been hustling to provide heat for those who can't afford the payments themselves.

On Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, two Bridger families with three children ages 2 and younger are sharing a house that has been without propane for almost a week.

Richard Larrabee, one of the residents of the house, said Wednesday that they had borrowed electric space heaters that help but don't adequately heat the house.

"It's cold. The kids are all right now, though," he said. "We don't have the money for propane."

Larrabee said he was hoping for help from the tribe.

In response to the cold snap and increased heating needs, Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., on Wednesday asked the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to release a portion of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Emergency Program emergency-contingency funds to help low-income people with winter heating costs.

"This program helps a small group of South Dakotans, but they are among our neediest families," Johnson said in a prepared statement. "With the bitter cold temperatures bearing down on our state, these emergency funds would make a tremendous difference for families suffering right now."

Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt has congressional authority to

release the emergency funds in addition to regular heating assistance money appropriated for the low-income energy- assistance program. In the 2005 state budget, South Dakota received almost \$10 million in federal heating assistance from LIHEAP. Indian tribes in the state received an additional \$2 million.

The federal funds send heat directly into the homes of people such as Pretends Eagle through local providers, including PTI Propane. The seven PTI delivery trucks serving the Pine Ridge reservation have been busy this week handling a flurry of urgent requests for gas, company administrative assistant Michelle Talbot said Wednesday.

“We’ve been busy, busy, busy. We pretty much cover the entire reservation, and we’ve

had one truck break down. We’re fixing that,”

she said. “I don’t want it to get any colder.”

Warmer weather forecast to begin today will help ease the energy crunch temporarily. But with more cold spells ahead and higher energy costs assured, the need for low-income heat assistance is expected to surpass the available funds.

For now, however, the heat is on again — and apparently will stay on — at Pretends Eagle’s. Pretends Eagle was in Rapid City on Wednesday. But Sylvester Two Bulls said he was relieved that someone the family didn’t know was willing to help ensure that his children had a warm place to sleep.

“That’s real nice of him,” Two Bulls said. “We do appreciate it.”