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## Catholic Charities helping meet utility aid requests

By John Franko

The scenario is all too familiar.

A father loses his job and his son comes down with a serious illness. The medical bills pile up, and the family is unable to pay other bills.

It's just one of the many stories caseworkers at Catholic Charities hear every day. Now, rising natural gas prices have prevented many families from meeting utility payments, and the number of gas shut-offs is increasing dramatically.

Catholic Charities normally receives about 1,000 calls a month asking for assistance. The number increased to about 2,000 in the past several months, reaching a high of some 2,400 in November.

The majority of them focused on utility concerns.

"People are very angry," said Diann Morse, administrative director for Catholic Charities. "They're calling a lot of places and not getting any help."

Lines of people waiting for help have also begun to appear at the agency's offices.

People are looking for help to pay all or part of their heating bill, security deposits and reconnection fees. It isn't just the low-income who are affected.

"We're dealing with a lot of families with two working parents who are struggling to make ends meet," said Holly Kinzler, director of outreach services.

The elderly are also vulnerable to shut-offs. Many of them are too proud to ask for help, or they don't know where to turn.

Morse said people should begin seeking assistance when they get a shut-off notice, and not wait until it actually takes place. She pointed

to the expense of reconnection fees.

In addition to financial assistance, Catholic Charities provides referrals to other sources of support. They include food banks to help lessen other bills and information regarding utilities.

Companies such as Duquesne Light provide a number of Universal Service Programs, including CAP, Smart Comfort, CARES, \$1 Energy Fund and LIHEAP.

Catholic Charities has several funds it uses to offer assistance. Among those are the Mother Teresa Fund, which was established through an endowment set up by a local family. Others, such as the Caritas Fund, are severely depleted.

Donations have been down the past several months because of the focus on national disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"It's the local people now who are suffering," Morse said.

Morse said those who receive assistance often come back to make their own contribution when they recover.

Donors can help expedite the process by purchasing gift cards from businesses such as Giant Eagle and mailing them to the agency. They may also earmark donations to a number of different areas, including "Utilities" and "Holiday Food."

Donations may be sent to: Catholic Charities, 212 Ninth St., Pittsburgh, Pa. 15222.

More information on donations is available by calling the Catholic Charities development office at 412-456-6969.

Catholic Charities has also done its part by sponsoring projects such as Operation Warm, in which 200 coats were distributed through its six-county offices.