

[Print Page]

Heating situation may be dire



Larry Dudding, a service technician with Kennedy's Inc., cleans and checks a furnace/air conditioner unit Friday at a Van Buren home. jmorehead@chronicle-tribune.com

Winter looking chilly with increasing oil, natural gas prices

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Consumers this winter will face record-high heating bills caused by the spiking costs of oil and natural gas, the U.S. Energy Information Administration predicts.

State officials are simultaneously anticipating the highest-ever level of demand for heating-assistance programs in what could be a very cold winter for some.

The situation in Grant County this winter is not going to be good, predicts Nancy Stevens, the Grant County coordinator for Action Inc., 1001 N. Western Ave., Suite E. Action Inc. is the organization that handles the local disbursements for the Indiana Community Action Association. It assisted 3,600 Grant

County families during the winter of 2007-08.

"We already have families whose gas is shut off," Stevens said of this year's situation. "But we don't have funding for them right now."

The state-funded program to assist people with home-heating costs will not kick off until Oct. 6, Stevens said. Until then, she simply has to advise people to be patient.

A large percentage of home-heating relief funds come from the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

This year, the Bush administration has proposed a 23 percent cut in that program's funding, said Dave Menzer, chairman of the Coalition to Keep Indiana Warm, which brings together service providers, utility companies, consumer advocates and state government.

"We're very concerned about this winter," Menzer said.

LIHEAP was established in 1982, and Menzer said funding has barely increased, not even close to the increase in heating costs, the increase in demand or even inflation.

"In 1982, those dollars covered three to four months of energy needs for the country," Menzer said. "Now, it's more like 30 or 34 days."

Congress has so far this year failed to appropriate income for the program. Menzer said the debate has been tied to the national debate about offshore drilling but that any proposed drilling won't affect prices this winter.

Congressman Dan Burton said through a spokesperson this week that the issue is not about finding the appropriate level of funding for LIHEAP but rather finding ways to reduce energy costs for all Americans and thereby reducing dependence on the national program.

There are several programs operated by gas provider Vectren Corp. designed to help low-income people with home heating, according to company spokesperson Chase Kelley.

As part of the company's Universal Service Program, customers who qualify for LIHEAP receive a 15 percent to 32 percent discount on their bills.

"It happens automatically when they sign up at an Action agency," Kelley said.

Customers who don't qualify for the program may also be eligible to receive a one-time, \$200 credit called Financial Hardship Dollars. It's intended for those who have suffered a sudden financial hardship, such as job loss or illness in the family, Kelley said.

She said all Vectren customers are eligible to engineer payment arrangement, free of surcharges and interest, to better mitigate the high cost of winter bills.

If a customer cannot pay a bill, she said it's important they contact Vectren to make them aware of the situation. She said the company wants to work with people to keep the gas turned on to as many houses as possible.

"Be proactive," Kelley said. "As soon as you open that bill and know you can't pay, call us. The last thing we want to do is disconnect people during the heating season."

Vectren will release its winter rate projections sometime next week, Kelley said.

During the summer, Kelley said some analysts predicted gas costs would be up 40 percent to 50 percent this winter from last. She said most have backed off those predictions, but customers should still brace for double-digit increases.

Menzer said he doesn't know what the winter will bring for Indiana's families, but he's not especially optimistic.

"We're very concerned when we look at the economy coupled with high gas prices," Menzer said.

"It's a real recipe for disaster for families." The cost of natural gas is definitely on the rise, Stevens said. This winter is going to be about how Grant County families are able to cope with it.

"We just do the best we can do to help them with what we can help them with," she said of Action. "Even if we don't have the money, we try not to let them leave the office without the gas being turned back on."

That means families often need to turn to other local organizations, such as The Salvation Army and local churches. Stevens said Action

facilitates that as much as possible but that some people need to do the work themselves.

"If we can't come up with enough, they have to find that themselves," she said.

Save on heat:

Dave Menzer of the Coalition to Keep Indiana Warm would like to see the country develop a long-term national energy policy. In his opinion, the centerpiece of such a policy should address the weatherization of the country's housing stock.

"Weatherizing a house can save 40 percent on energy bills for years to come," Menzer said.

Weatherizing means making a house more efficient from winter weather elements.

Homes that can especially benefit from weatherization updates are most of those built in the 1970s or earlier. Menzer estimated that 80 percent of Indiana's housing stock could benefit from weatherization.

Some basic tips:

- Ensure that attic hatch and crawl and basement access doors are closed.
- Ensure that upper sash and self-storing storm windows are in the fully closed position and locks are engaged.
- Ensure that fireplace dampers are closed.
- Open heating registers and move anything covering them.

During cold spells:

- Use a rolled bath towel or "draft snake" to block leaky door bottoms.
- Open drapes or heavy curtains when the sun shines; close when it does not.
- Run exhaust fans only when needed.

No-cost things to do:

- Turn down the thermostat when away or sleeping.
- Turn down water heater temperature to 120 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Reduce hot water consumption: wash clothes in cold water, rinse dishes in cold water, take short showers.
- Clean clothes dryer lint traps and dryer outlet pipes.

Low-cost things to do:

- Clean or replace furnace filters.
- Convert light bulbs to compact fluorescent, highest use locations first.
- Install shrink-wrap interior storm window kits on leaky windows.
- Plug holes and utility penetrations with foam in a can.
- Caulk leaky interior edges along baseboards and window trim.
- Replace broken or missing receptacle and switch covers.

Moderate-cost things to do:

- Install a set-back thermostat.
- Install low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators.
- Install a water heater tank wrap if you have an older, fiberglass-insulated unit.
- Insulate hot water pipes in unconditioned areas.
- Insulate ducts in unconditioned areas.
- Perform attic air

sealing and then add insulation up to R-38. •Install proper door latches to keep doors closed securely. Moderate-cost things that may require a contractor: •Attic air sealing. •Attic insulation. •Exterior wall insulation. •Furnace clean and tune-up. •Air flow verification for the duct system. •Duct sealing.

Source: Indiana Community Action Association.