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In the News

Reprinted from the Chicago Tribune

More residents seek assistance with energy bills

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By Dennis Sullivan
Special to the Tribune

Home heating costs are expected to be lower this winter, but that's cold comfort to cash-strapped south suburban residents like Reginald Thompson, who has gone without heat at his Calumet City home since his service was shut off in March.

The 79-year-old retiree said he inadvertently missed a monthly payment in his Nicor Gas payment plan and was told his heat wouldn't be turned back on unless he coughed up his entire \$900 bill – more than he could afford.

Such predicaments are increasingly common in some of the south suburbs' working-class communities, officials say. As winter looms, some people are scrambling to set up payment plans or seek assistance with their energy bills. And turnout at energy-assistance events in the south suburbs has been greater than in years past, officials said.

This month, 1,800 people waited in line at the annual Energy Assistance Fair at Thornton Township Hall in South Holland. Some people waited in line for hours, and the turnout was more than five times greater than last year's attendance of about 350.

"It's the Great Depression all over again when you see it up close," said Robert Storman, who heads community relations for Thornton Township.

Nearly 800 people at the fair qualified for direct donations – ranging from about \$200 to more than \$1,000 – from Thornton Township to help cover heating costs. Others met with representatives from Nicor, ComEd and other utilities to resolve problems and work out payment plans.

"A lot of people are hurting," said Calumet City Ald. Thaddeus Jones. "A lot of these people have \$3,000 bills, and they don't know how to pay them."

Those in need also received help with applications for assistance from federal and state programs.

Not everyone at the fair was in dire straits. Hazel Crest resident Tanzinia Raine, for example, said she simply wanted help "for my light bill, so I can keep on a budget plan – keep it steady every month."

With 2.2 million customers, Nicor has "had a substantial number of customers who have had trouble paying their energy bills" during the last two years, spokesman Richard Caragol said. Caragol said Nicor has seen a 4 percent increase in defaulted payments for 2009 compared with 2008. From 2007 to 2008, the increase was 26 percent, he said.

But some good news is coming this winter, says the Federal Energy Information Administration. In October, it projected that American households would spend 8 percent less on home heating this winter through March 31 thanks to higher-than-average expected temperatures.

Even during an upbeat economy, there are always some who struggle to get by, which is why the Community and Economic Development Association in Harvey regularly joins with ComEd and gas companies to hold energy assistance events, said Carolyn Taylor, the association's director.

Thornton Township encompasses 17 towns, and census figures for 2005-08 show the township residents' household income and per capita income were 25 to 30 percent below those of Cook County residents overall.

Bloom Township used funds from the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program to assist 130 families last month and worked with the Community and Economic Development Association last week to help 60 more families.



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Township Administrator Dan Sanaghan said turnout at such events has increased by about 25 percent in recent years, and the township likely will schedule another energy fair in April.

"Some of it is due to the word getting out, and some of it is because there is more of a need now," he said. "A lot of people that aren't used to coming in are looking for assistance."

Before he went to the Nov. 4 event in South Holland, Thompson owed Nicor \$900. He said he got into that predicament in part because he had no liquidity after he took money from the sale of the auto body shop he owned for 55 years and lent it to former employees. "What can you do?" he asked. "They can't pay it back."

Caragol said he couldn't address Thompson's situation without more detailed information, but said the company offers "a number of options" for people who are falling behind in their payments, including one-time annual grants up to \$450 to qualified residential customers through the Nicor Gas Sharing program, which is funded by contributions from customers, employees and Nicor Gas.

Thompson received the help he needed for his utility costs when Thornton Township gave him \$1,900. "It was based on income, need and how long he's been out," Jones said. "He had ComEd and Nicor issues."

South Holland resident Sylvester Powell, a retiree, is hopeful he can set up payment plans with ComEd and Nicor because money is tight.

"When you're working, you're adding to what you've got," Powell said. "I don't care how much money you have, if you don't keep adding to it, it goes fast."

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