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## "Walk for Warmth" Today To Raise Funds For Heating Assistance

Consumers Energy has partnered with local community action agencies to "Walk for Warmth." They're hoping to raise much-needed funds for thousands of Michigan residents trying to stay warm this winter.

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**Reporter:** Caroline Vandergriff

Despite the snow, the Walk for Warmth scheduled for this morning in Jackson will go on as planned. The walk is important because money raised today will help needy families with their heating bills. Consumers Energy and the Community Action Agency in Jackson say despite the mild temperatures, just as many families are looking for help with their heating bills this year.

That's why Consumers Energy has partnered with local community action agencies to "Walk for Warmth." They're hoping to raise much-needed funds for thousands of Michigan residents trying to stay warm this winter. "It's a very difficult time, even for people who are working," said Marsha Kreucher, the CEO of the Jackson Community Action Agency. "People are trying to get by as best they can, but it's pretty frantic for agencies like ours that are working at the front lines in the community."

The Community Action Agency in Jackson has been forced to turn people away who are looking for help with their heating bills. The mild temperatures this winter haven't lessened the growing need. Last year, the agency helped about 870 homes with emergency utility assistance - this year, they have received 1,100 requests in January alone. "We were surprised, and I think the reason is although the weather is warmer this winter, the utility costs have gone up," said Kreucher. "So they may be using less fuel, but they're paying more for it."

Marjorie Longcore with Consumers Energy says even though bills in the community have been lower overall, many families are still struggling. "We still see a number of people who are calling, looking for ways to get on payment plans, letting us know they're having trouble paying bills due to job loss or a situation in their family," said Longcore. "And other funds that have been available in previous years are not available this year."

That change in funding has put pressure on utility companies and community agencies to find new sources of money to help people pay their heating bills. They say the alternative is a dangerous one. "There are families that come in to talk to us who are bringing their BBQ grills inside to keep their house warm, or having an indoor fire put so that they can burn wood and paper to keep warm," Kreucher said. "They're taking risks they shouldn't have to. There are many tragedies for families during this time of year. Consumers Energy is sponsoring several "Walks for Warmth" this weekend, including the one in Jackson that starts at 11:45 am in front of the Consumers Energy headquarters.

On Saturday, there will be walks in Lansing, St. Johns, and Howell. Just click on WILX's Hot Button for more information.