

Coping with the cold

Aid agencies, utilities see increase in requests for help in paying heating bills in recent cold weather

By David Frownfelder and John Mulcahy -Daily Telegram Staff Writers

ADRIAN — With another round of bitterly cold weather heading toward Michigan, more people are seeking help with high utility bills. Burt Fenby, executive director of the Lenawee County Community Action Agency, said his agency has seen an increase in the number of people seeking help. CAA is available to assist people in getting the help they need. “The number one issue has been the alarming rate of utility assistance requests. Because of the severity of the winter, people are getting pushed deeper and deeper in the hole,” he said. “The cost hasn’t necessarily gone up, but (utilities) want to keep supply.” He said, for instance, people seeking help with propane issues are finding help, but less fuel. Fenby said he has been told this is not due to a shortage, but to make certain supplies remain plentiful.

“The propane companies will approve up to 500 gallons of propane, but are only delivering 200 gallons,” Fenby said. “They told me they are doing this in order to keep supplies enough to help as many people as possible. The companies are trying to police this to keep as much fuel available as possible.”



Several men have been using the day shelter at Damascus Road, Inc. on South Tecumseh Street in Adrian to stay warm during the extremely cold weather. TELEGRAM PHOTO BY LAD STRAYER

Patty Nowlin, director of communications for Midwest Energy Cooperative, said the extreme cold is affecting the demand on fuels such as propane and electricity, both of which Midwest supplies. “Absolutely there has been an increase in demand,” Nowlin said. The cooperative’s members using propane are guaranteed a price cap during the heating season, and if the company has to start buying propane on the open market, it will probably have to buy it at a higher price than that cap because of a propane shortage, Nowlin said.

“The propane suppliers right now are just worried about getting their customers through the next couple of weeks, months,” Nowlin said. Requests to the Lenawee County Salvation Army’s heating assistance program for deliverable fuels such as propane are up, caseworker Candace Aranda said. The organization has been getting eight to 10 calls a week for help compared to perhaps two a week during a more normal winter, Aranda said. Because of the extreme cold, the Salvation Army is temporarily waiving the usual co-pay for assistance with deliverable fuels, Capt. Gordon Knight said. “We didn’t want anyone to wind up empty” for lack of a copay, he said.

Patty Clark, community development specialist with Midwest Energy Cooperative, said everyone should begin looking for heating assistance help by calling the 211 help line. Calling 211 connects to trained counselors who can help callers find the help they’re looking for, much like how calling 911 to report a fire or crime connects the caller with an emergency dispatcher.

Amy Palmer, executive director of Lenawee United Way, said heating assistance calls have been the top request on the 211 telephone help line since it was launched in 2009. Calling before getting a shut-off notice is best, Palmer said. “As soon as you feel you can’t pay the utility bill, call right away,” she said. Clark said calling 211 will first direct the caller to the Michigan Department of Human Services to determine if they are eligible for state or federal assistance, she said. If they are, that frees up other, unrestricted funds, such as the money that will be raised by the Feb. 22 Walk for Warmth for people who may not qualify for government assistance.

Barb Mitzel, area manager at Consumers Energy’s Adrian service center, said the Walk for Warmth begins with registration from 9:15 to 9:45 a.m. at the First Presbyterian Church, 156 E. Maumee St. in Adrian. Sponsored by the Lenawee United Way and CAA, the walk will be in downtown Adrian, with the longest route being 1.5 miles, Mitzel said.

Last year, the Walk for Warmth raised more than \$19,000 to help people with utility bills. Mitzel said businesses can have teams in the walk. For information, call CAA at 263-7861. "The walk not only raises awareness, but every dollar raised stays in Lenawee County to help our friends and neighbors who need it," she said.

Mitzel said Consumers has also seen an increase in the number of people seeking help with bills. Whitney Skeans, customer assistance coordinator for Consumers, said the company has many different avenues of help for people. Consumers works with local agencies to help people cope with escalating energy costs. She said people can enroll in discount programs based on income. A pilot program is the Consumers Affordable Resource for Energy (CARE), for which people can enroll through February. This program provides help on outstanding utility bills and assistance on future bills.

"We don't want to risk customers' safety. We want people to know they can get help early. They don't have to wait for shutoff notices," she said. "Health and safety are fundamental and people should know there is help. They don't have to put their family's health at risk." Consumers has suspended shutoffs during the extreme cold, Skeans said. She urged those who may be having problems making their payments to reach out for help, either through Consumers or through local agencies. "Customers need to understand there is help available. They don't have to wait for shutoff notices," Skeans said.

The CARE program offers:

- _ A 40 percent bill credit on energy charges from the time of enrollment through August 2014.
- _ Fresh start assistance on any past due balance at enrollment, if needed.
- _ Energy education via the EASE (Everyday Actions Save Energy) online curriculum, including a customized homeenergy profile report with low- or no-cost tips.
- _ An opportunity for gas and gas-and-electric customers to receive in-home weatherization services through Consumers' existing Helping Neighbors program.
- _ Dedicated assistance agencies to support CARE participants to improved energy account management.

Information on CARE and other assistance from Consumers Energy can be found on Consumers' website, www.consumersenergy.com. Skeans also reminds people of the home heating tax credit available to some on income tax returns. Consumers also makes referrals to 211 networks.

For some, paying utility bills is less of a worry than simply finding a warm place to stay. At the Damascus Road day shelter on Tecumseh Street in Adrian, 22-year-old Adam Tubbs, who is homeless, said Friday he stays at Damascus Road during the day and sleeps at the Share the Warmth program, housed at the Salvation Army in Lenawee County, where he also gets fed. Most of the half dozen men at Damascus Road Friday follow the same pattern. "It's hard to cope with it because it's bitter out there," Tubbs said of the cold. Tubbs said he has been homeless four years. "This is by far the worst (winter) I've come across," he said.

Another Damascus Road patron, John, who preferred not to give his last name, said the winter is hard. "The older you get, the harder it gets," he said. He has a state-issued Bridge card to get food, but he comes to Damascus Road to stay warm and goes to Share the Warmth to sleep, John said.

"I'm just thankful that they got Share the Warmth for the homeless and they've got this place down here that Bob (Fultz, founder of Damascus Road) puts out for people," he said. Capt. Gordon Knight of the Salvation Army in Lenawee County said attendance at Share the Warmth is 20 or 21 people a night, about the same as last year. "It's up from a few weeks back before the cold snap hit," Knight said. For a few days after the heavy snow that came Jan. 6, the normally nighttime-only Share the Warmth facilities were kept open all day, he said.



George Blackburn from the Hudson area was in Adrian for lunch at The Daily Bread of Lenawee soup kitchen. He said he's an ice fisherman and likes the cold. TELEGRAM PHOTO BY LAD STRAYER