

Funding for heat, electric bills reduced

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Fears of future federal cuts fuel reduction in maximum payouts

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Hundreds of Jackson County residents struggling to pay electric and heating bills might receive less help from the state this season.

The state Department of Human Services has slashed the maximum amount of money given to a household for electricity, natural gas and other fuels through its State Emergency Relief program.

This is in response to an anticipated reduction in funding to the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

As of Friday, the maximum pay-out for state emergency relief went from \$850 to \$350 for electricity; from \$850 to \$350 for natural gas, wood and other fuels; from \$850 to \$650 for deliverable fuels; and from \$1,700 to \$700 for all-electric households.

"That's a significant reduction," said Tanda Reynolds, director of the Jackson County Department of Human Services.

"We know the impact, and it's not good."

Jackson County received more than \$2.2 million in state emergency relief funds and handled an average of 476 cases per month from October 2008 to September 2009, according to the state Department of Human Services.

From October 2009 to August of this year, the county

received \$3.4 million in state emergency relief funds and handled an average of 635 cases a month, according to the department.

The state might be able to increase the capped amounts if additional funding is available, said DHS spokeswoman Christina Fecher.

Local nonprofits that are already seeing a high demand for utility assistance now expect to see even more people coming to their doors for help. The Salvation Army in Jackson gets at least eight requests a day from people who need help paying their utility bills, said Maj. John L. Mallett of the Salvation Army. The average pay-out can range anywhere from \$450 to \$700 per household, he said.

"We're limited with what we can do as far as helping clients," Mallett said. "We might have to cut back on the amount (of money) that we give to people or the amount of people we're able to help."

The Community Action Agency in Jackson receives hundreds of calls during the winter months for assistance, with majority of them being for utility help, said Chris Kilmer, the agency's director of community programs.

Some clients have bills that exceed \$1,000, he said.

"There will be more demand for our services," Kilmer said.

"That's a significant reduction. We know the impact, and it's not good."

— Tanda Reynolds, Director of the Jackson County Department of Human Services