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Can't afford to keep warm? Energy assistance program can help

People who can't pay their heating bills can apply to the Snohomish County Energy Assistance office for financial aid.

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Dorothy Sanders of Lake Stevens doesn't want to have to choose between keeping the electricity in her home and feeding her kids healthy food.

Now that she has received a grant from the Snohomish County Energy Assistance office, she will feel less pressure to make those sorts of choices, the single mother of four said.

"It has been a complete savior," Sanders said. "There are people out there who are really, really struggling."

Sanders, who says she can't work because she's taking care of an aunt with Alzheimer's disease, is among thousands who eagerly await the opening of the energy assistance office each winter, said Bill Beuscher, supervisor of the program operated by Snohomish County.

In 2006, 4,613 households in Snohomish County received an average grant of \$376 from the federally funded Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. The money is paid in one lump sum and is applied directly to a heating bill, typically to Snohomish County PUD.

Rising costs for gasoline, propane and heating oil all indicate that it may be a tough winter for low-income people, Beuscher said. He said his budget of \$1.5 million didn't increase this year, so he expects the program won't be able to help the same number of households unless more money is poured into it this winter.

"The opening days of this energy assistance season have been as busy as or busier than any opening in the past decade," he said. "More households are seeking assistance as family budgets are increasingly being squeezed by higher overall energy costs and rising prices in other sectors."

The gap between those who qualify for energy assistance and those who actually get help is growing across the nation, mainly because the amount of money poured into the federal program has been flat, Beuscher said.

That disheartens some because a new study shows that low-income families who don't get help paying their winter heating bills are 23 percent more likely to include children who are growing poorly because of poor nutrition. The survey was conducted by the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project and was released in October.

"This epidemic affects children of all ages, but babies and toddlers are at the greatest risk," said Dr. Deborah Frank, director of the Grow Clinic for Children and principal investigator of the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program at Boston Medical Center.

Babies and toddlers who live in "energy-insecure households" also are more likely to manifest developmental problems and other negative health effects associated with a poor diet, she said.

For Sanders, those findings hit too close to home.

She recently was told by doctors that problems one of her sons is having may be linked to not eating enough healthy food.

"Junk food and processed foods are a lot less expensive than good foods," Sanders said. "They said we need to go to (healthier) foods. They said that's the reason he was doing so poorly in school."

She said she's been trying to buy better food for about a month, and said she's seen a positive response in her son. The vitamins he's taking now also seem to be helping.

"It's going to be a struggle," she said. "I can't buy as much food (as before). Everybody is going to have to cut back, to eat less."

The energy assistance that Sanders received last week will allow her to buy more of the food her son needs, she said.

"It's very important," she said. "People don't understand."

Canela Alvarez of Monroe also is relying on the energy assistance program to help her care for her children.

"I have two little boys," she said. "I'm a single mom."

She said she's on track to getting back on her feet and perhaps going back to school after participating in a housing program offered by her church.

"The energy assistance really helps me," she said. "I was having trouble paying my bill."

Snohomish County PUD also offers help to low-income and senior customers, said Neil Neroutsos, a utility spokesman.

"As customers identify that they might be struggling with their bills, we work with them," he said. He said the utility can connect them with several other assistance programs, including the county's energy assistance office.

The PUD is on pace to see its number of disconnections decrease slightly this year, Neroutsos said. By the end of October, the utility had 16,593 disconnections. It had a record 21,086 disconnections in 2006. Each disconnection is usually short in duration and there are restrictions on turning off the electricity in winter. The utility has 315,000 customers.

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