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Metro Action Commission plans faster help on rent, utilities

By Michael Cass
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Deluged with requests for help from residents who are struggling to pay their bills, the Metro Action Commission plans to give priority this week to those in danger of being hit the hardest by cold weather and economic misfortune.

The commission said it would look first at applications from customers who are having trouble paying energy bills, in jeopardy of being evicted or potentially facing foreclosure as a result of overdue mortgage payments. The agency has received nearly 1,000 applications for utility assistance alone in the last 10 business days.

"With nearly 200 people coming to us each day for help mostly with utilities, rent and mortgages, we need to make some temporary changes to the way we handle all requests so that families will not have to wait extreme amounts of time for assistance," Cynthia Croom, the commission's executive director, said in a news release Friday.

MAC spokeswoman Lisa Gallon said the economic recession has forced people who never showed up at the agency before to seek help this winter.

"We think it's primarily due to the economic situation our nation is facing," Gallon said.

Metro gets \$3.1 million

MAC recently received an additional \$3.1 million in federal energy assistance funds to aid more families who need help with utility payments. Gallon said the agency expects to have served 6,000 customers by mid-January, a little more than six months into this fiscal year, which began July 1.

MAC served 5,993 customers in the full 12 months of the previous fiscal year.

Most customers won't notice any change in the way the agency operates, Gallon said. Applications that aren't processed this week will be handled next week.
