

# TENNESSEAN COM

## Frigid winter weather forces poor to choose heat or rent



Written by

Jenny Upchurch

A mother had her electricity cut off this week even as more snow and cold headed for Nashville.

The working woman had the choice, "pay the rent or pay the utility bill," after she got behind with a large December power bill, said Tanya Gray of the Martha O'Bryan Center, where the woman sought help Wednesday.

Colder-than-normal temperatures last month and in January have sent utility bills spiraling up.

The Nashville Electric Service saw bills in December running about 25 percent more than normal and 19 percent higher than December 2009, said Tim Hill, spokesman for the utility in Nashville.

Piedmont Gas, which delivers natural gas in Middle Tennessee, also is expecting higher bills for customers, according to news reports from its Charlotte, N.C., corporate

office.

The Martha O'Bryan Center has seen an increase in appeals for emergency rent and utility assistance in the past six months, Gray said. The money comes from a United Way grant. A limited number of people can be helped each month, and the aid often isn't enough.

"We can give a small amount, but it's not enough to pay it all to get it turned back on," she said.

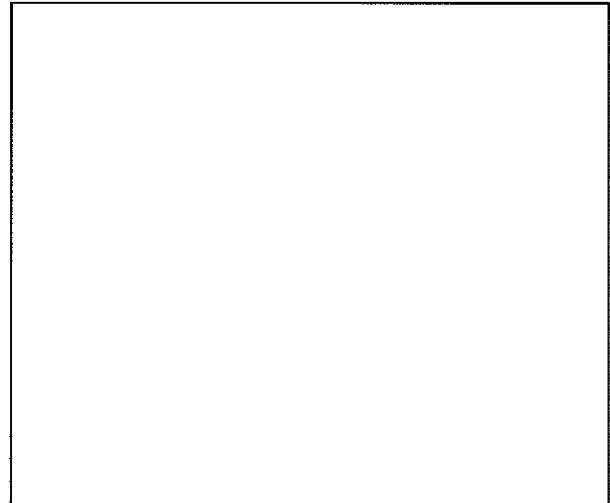
Other community groups are seeing the same need.

An elderly woman sought help from St. Luke's Community House, a nonprofit social services agency that serves West Nashville

"She said, 'It just keeps getting higher and higher.' ... It is beyond what she could afford," said Kelli Bratton, St. Luke's community services program director.

"I think it's especially difficult for those on

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fixed incomes," Bratton said, noting that St. Luke's saw a spike in aid requests last winter and is seeing those increase again this winter.

## 204 families get help

Since January 2010, St. Luke's has provided aid to 204 families, 31 of them senior citizens. That aid is limited to \$60 per client.

Metro Action Commission provides the bulk of utility assistance in Davidson County through the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP. Other agencies distribute it to other Tennessee counties.

Recipients can get up to \$600 once every 12 months as a credit for a utility bill, including electricity, natural gas, propane and fuel oil. Between July 1 and Wednesday, Metro Action had served 8,685 households, compared with 6,402 in the same time period a year ago.

Metro Action has more money this year to help folks with heating and cooling bills.

"We were told last week that an additional \$4.6 million will be appropriated for this program, which will bring the total LIHEAP funding up to \$9.5 million for this current program year," said spokeswoman Lisa Gallon.

## Summer is far away

The agency anticipates being able to help

22,777 households by June 30. That is compared to the \$7 million in LIHEAP last year that served 12,781 households.

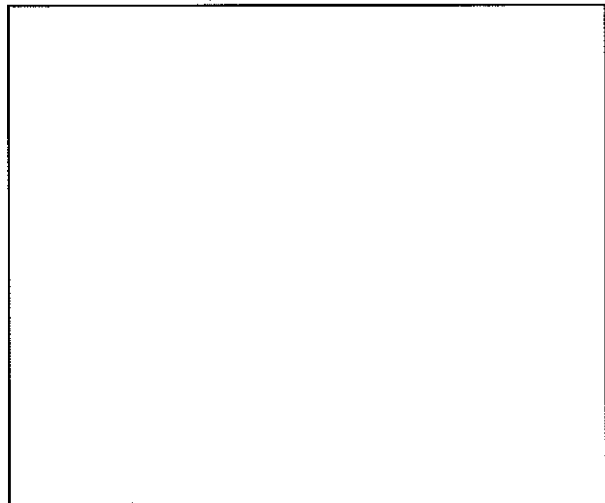
It will be needed as the National Weather Service says it is tracking an unusually cold winter and forecasts below-average temperatures to continue into February.

Last winter was cold, the coldest in Nashville in 30 years, according to Bobby Boyd at the National Weather Service office in Nashville.

But this December and into January it has been even colder. The average temperature in December was 35, 6 degrees below normal, and in January the average has been 31, 5 degrees below normal.

And a warming trend is not in the forecast. A weather pattern, the Arctic Oscillation, promises more below-normal temperatures possibly into early February, Boyd said.

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## Issues to solve

The only time that NES will not disconnect any residential customer for non-payment is if the high temperature of the day is projected to be below freezing. In the summer, the no-disconnect policy kicks in if the heat index is predicted to be higher than 105 degrees.

Gray's client will get her paycheck next week and hopes to get electricity restored. "But what does she do between the cutoff and next week with the snow coming?" Gray said.

In situations such as this, Gray helps clients make alternate plans, such as going to a friend's or relative's house or splitting up children to stay at different homes. There are other issues, such as how to keep food from spoiling while the refrigerator is off and how to get to and from work.

"I know I'll be wondering" how well the family makes it through, Gray said.

## Where to get aid

• **Metro Action Commission** can provide credits for utility bills to Davidson County residents. The office is at 1624 Fifth Ave. N., Nashville, or call 615-862-8860. Information and applications are available on its website, [www.nashville.gov/mac](http://www.nashville.gov/mac).

• Residents of **Cheatham, Sumner, Trousdale, Rutherford, Robertson, Wilson or Williamson** counties can contact Mid-Cumberland Community Action Agency, 233 Legend Drive, Suite 103, P.O. Box 310, Lebanon, at 615-742-1113. The agencies use federal money to provide grants of between \$300 and \$600 for households who meet income eligibility. Priority is given for aid to go to households with children 5 and younger that have residents who are disabled or elderly.

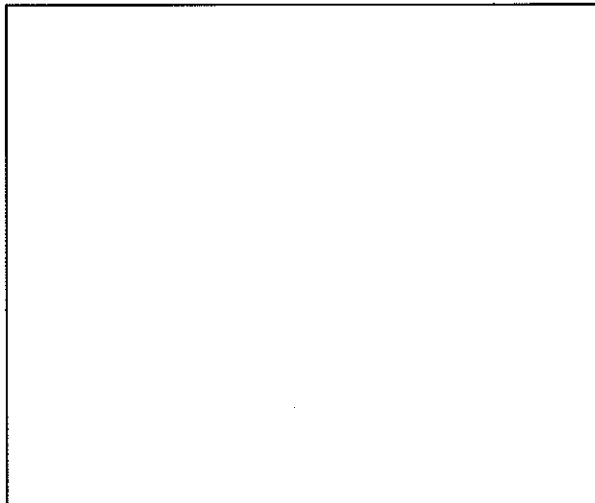
• **St. Luke's Community House** can provide up to \$60 to residents in the 37209 zip code. You must have children younger than 18 living with you, be 60 or older or be disabled or unable to work. St. Luke's is at 5601 New York Ave. It is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Call 615-350-7893.

• **The Martha O'Bryan Center** has emergency aid for rent and utilities. Contact its main office at 711 S. Seventh St., call 615-254-1791 or go to its website at [www.marthaobryan.org](http://www.marthaobryan.org).

• Other resources are available by calling the **United Way's** 211 number. Advisers there will get specific information about your needs and eligibility and refer you to agencies and programs that can offer assistance.

— JENNY UPCHURCH

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