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The Columbus Dispatch

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Heating-help deadline extended



Grove City retiree Charlie Rehl, 68, went to IMPACT Community Action for help with home heating bills.

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Help with heating bills

Because of the extreme winter, Ohio has extended the application deadline until April 15 for the Winter Crisis Program. It provides one-time payments of up to \$175 to households facing disconnection or with less than 35 percent capacity in their fuel tanks.

The gross annual income limit to qualify is, for example, \$27,143 for two people, \$34,178 for three or \$41,213 for a family of four.

IMPACT Community Action will be open from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. on the next two Saturdays — April 5 and 12 — at 700 Bryden Rd. to take applications for Winter Crisis and the Percentage of Income Payment Plan, or PIPP Plus. PIPP's income limits are \$23,265 for two people, \$29,295 for three people and \$35,325 for a household of four.

Applicants must bring government-issued photo identification; Social Security cards for all household residents; proof of income for the past 90 days for all adults in the household; a current gas and/or electric bill; and a copy of their lease, if service is disconnected

For more information, call IMPACT at 614-252-2799 or email the agency at emergencyassistance@impactca. Consumers statewide can call the state's toll-free energy-assistance hot line at 1-800-282-0880 or visit energyhelp.ohio.gov.

Sources: IMPACT Community Action, Ohio Development Services Agency

By **Rita Price**

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Even when he could see his breath in his bedroom, Charlie Rehl didn't touch the thermostat. "I put insulated underwear on," he said.

Brandi Baker kept her curtains drawn and stuffed towels under her doors. "Anything to keep the heat in," she said.

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The cost of warmth during the long, bitter winter has been a budget-buster for many Ohio households. Nearly 134,000 have received about \$34 million worth of heating-bill help so far through the state's Home Energy Assistance Winter Crisis Program, which is being extended until April 15. The application deadline typically falls on March 31.

David Goodman, director of the Ohio Development Services Agency, said the extension allows those Ohioans "who didn't think they would need help, the opportunity to receive it."

IMPACT Community Action, a local agency that administers the Winter Crisis Program, is urging families to take advantage of the extra time.

"That last bill is coming — now," said Carmen Allen, community outreach coordinator at IMPACT. "You don't have to wait until you're in crisis."

Columbia Gas disconnect notices increased to 33,000 statewide from November through February, compared with about 32,000 last winter, spokesman Steve Jablonski said.

The frigid weather, however, appears to have staved off the actual disconnects because shutoffs don't take place when the forecast calls for temperatures of 20 or below, Jablonski said.

"Actual terminations are just short of about 8,000," he said. Last year's tally was nearly 13,000 during the same time period.

American Electric Power reports similar trends. "Our delinquencies are up," spokeswoman Terri Flora said, "but disconnects are down because of the weather conditions."

Regina Clemons, IMPACT's director of emergency assistance, said the agency is seeing lots of people who had never sought assistance before — Rehl and Baker among them.

Baker, 29, is a college graduate whose job through Ohio State University was eliminated. Then the pipes burst in her bathroom, the ceiling caved in, and she had to run large fans and space heaters for days to dry things out.

"It's about half what I was making," the Reynoldsburg-area resident said of her unemployment check. "But my bills aren't going to change."

Rehl, 68, is a military veteran and retiree going through a divorce. The first electricity bill in his new Grove City apartment bit deeply into his fixed income. "I've really got to watch my money," he said.

Clemons said IMPACT staff members usually can stop disconnects as they enroll people in one or more energy-assistance programs.

The Winter Crisis Program offers a one-time payment of up to \$175 for families at or below 175 percent of the poverty level, while the Percentage of Income Payment Plan, or PIPP Plus, is available year-round, helps make payments affordable and includes opportunity for debt forgiveness.

The Neighbor to Neighbor Program has a higher income limit and applies its grants directly to a customer's AEP Ohio bill. A Columbia Gas Fuel Fund program was exhausted weeks ago.

Despite the potential help, Clemons said, some people don't know what to do. A few pile up utility debt for years. "We just saw a bill this morning of \$9,000," she said last week.

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