# Survey shows sharp rise in US households seeking utility assistance

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A survey shows that more than 8.2 million US households received utility assistance through the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) for fiscal year 2009, about 2.1 million more than the previous year. In a December 18 press release, the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association (NEADA), an organization of state and tribal administrators of LIHEAP, issued the findings of their survey of fiscal year 2009 data.

Disbursed to state governments and administered by a patchwork of local agencies, LIHEAP is the primary program in the United States to help low-income individuals and families struggling with their utility payments. The data released by NEADA shows both the dire conditions faced by millions of American families as well as the callous indifference of the establishment to their situation.

The more than 25 percent jump in households receiving assistance through LIHEAP for 2009 over 2008 is largely the result of an increase in funding for the program by Congress, which raised the total appropriation for LIHEAP from $2.57 billion to $5.1 billion. This is still a wholly inadequate sum to address the utility needs of the population, given the ease with which the government has appropriated funds vastly larger for the Wall Street bailout and the ongoing occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite the increase in LIHEAP funding, utility shutoffs affected about 5 percent more households in 2009 than in 2008, a total of about 4.3 million. The average amount owed by shut-off households also increased, from $253 to $279. Further, in 2009 there were 12.5 million households who were behind in payments, owing an average of $276. Among the states with the highest increases in households receiving assistance were California and Florida, at 162 percent and 104 percent respectively, two states hit hard by foreclosures and the attendant loss of jobs.

The NEADA survey showed that 44.3 million US households were eligible for utility assistance in 2009, a figure that testifies to the precarious situation facing a large section of the population. Of this number, only 18.7 percent received LIHEAP assistance, which comes in the form of a one-time grant averaging $494. While eligibility requirements for LIHEAP can vary somewhat depending on the state, federal legislation for the program stipulates that households receiving assistance must not have an income greater than 150 percent of the poverty level or 60 percent of the state median income (whichever is higher).

Because of the limited funds available to the program, many of the agencies responsible for distributing the LIHEAP money have a first-come, first-served policy. Even then they are often forced to prioritize, concentrating on households most at risk. The scarcity of funds also contributes to the raising of bureaucratic barriers, in the form of onerous requirements to prove a household's need. These all add up to the low rate of utilization among eligible households.

As dire as the situation is for many families in 2009, based on initial applications NEADA projects a 20 percent increase in applications for the 2010 fiscal year. Because the total amount available has not been increased since last year, the average amount given to each household through LIHEAP will have to be decreased, or a higher percentage of applicants turned down.

Given the continued levels of unemployment, it is no surprise that utility shutoffs would be increasing this year. In some cases, however, shutoffs are not related directly to unemployment, but rather to landlords who have lost their property to foreclosure, and who are in some cases the account holders for certain utilities.

Tenants in a Whiting, Indiana, apartment building found themselves without heat when the new property owners ordered the gas turned off to force the tenants to leave. One of the tenants, Nicole Talavera, said she has to dress her children in coats just to stay in the apartment. Speaking to CBS, she said, "We had no idea about the landlord foreclosing, we were still paying rent." Without gas, the tenants also have no hot water and are currently boiling water to bathe, according to resident Christopher Spedus. Another, Marisela Morales, said, "We've just been using tons of blankets, staying warm, and that's about it. But

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everything else is just really cold."

On December 10 several dozen people gathered in front of the DTE Energy headquarters in Detroit to protest utility shut-offs. Anthony King, one of the protesters, told the *Michigan Citizen*, "People are losing their homes, and a lot of people are walking away from them because they can't afford to pay the utilities. Rates need to be lowered, especially in the wintertime, and there needs to be a moratorium on shutoffs." King himself lost his home to foreclosure. After moving into an apartment, he was evicted for not paying his rent because DTE demanded payment of outstanding bills from his former house and threatened him with a shut off.

In California, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) is fending off numerous complaints from area residents about the utility's introduction of new "smart" meters, which allow for remote meter readings and disconnections. The number of low-income households cut off by PG&E spiked by 75 percent this year, according to a state report released last month. For the year ending in August, 91,393 poor households lost their utility service, compared with 52,202 in the previous 12-month period.

Three common dangers resulting from the shutoff of utilities during the winter are hypothermia, fire, and exposure to carbon monoxide. Without anything to power heating sources, individuals and entire families can freeze to death. People attempting to light homes with candles, or compensate for lost gas heat by running electric space heaters, risk accidentally starting fires in their homes. Others, unaware of the danger of running gasoline generators, introduce dangerous and even fatal levels of carbon monoxide. Recent reports from around the country provide tragic examples of the human cost of these abysmal conditions.

On December 3, in Columbia, Missouri, the fire department found the lifeless body of 30-year-old Nathan Curry. Curry had been apparently living in a house without heat or electricity, and hypothermia is thought to have played a role in his death, according to the medical examiner. Curry also reportedly suffered from acute bronchopneumonia. According to the city of Columbia, which directly supplied most of his utilities through Columbia Water and Light, Curry's electric service had been shut off on September 30. Although his house was still supplied with natural gas for heating, the system requires electricity to control the thermostat.

Curry's friend Jonathan Steffens told the *Missourian* Curry had been unemployed since leaving a job eight months earlier. Another friend, Pete Warnock, said, "We knew that he had been living off his savings." Clearing out Curry's house, Steffens noted that many of Curry's possessions had been boxed up, as if for sale. Another friend, Dan Campbell, said that "it sounded like he realized he was getting into a low spot and was working on trying to fix it," and that "it snuck up on him like it snuck up on all of us."

Earlier this month a man in Canton, Ohio was also found dead in his home of hypothermia. Rick Walters of the Stark County Coroner's Office said that gas to Manuel Garcia's home had been shut off "for some time" and that investigation of Garcia's skin tissue showed that "some of it looks nearly frostbitten." A neighbor, Susan Heath, told Akron's WEWS, "That's heart-breaking. I did not know he did not have heat, because I would have done something."

On December 14, two children, ages five and seven, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, were found in critical condition from carbon monoxide poisoning. Their father, Derek Frazier, had been unemployed for five months and fell behind on his electric bill. Having found a new job, but still without power, he decided to buy a generator and run it during the day when no one was home, leaving the windows open at night. However, the levels of carbon monoxide present were still too high inside the dwelling.

Speaking to the *Sun-Sentinel*, Frazier stated, "I just wanted to wake [the children] up and get them dressed for school and drop them off to the bus stop, and they weren't responding." Though neighbors reported the children were well taken care of, Children Protective Services are investigating the possibility of neglect and criminal charges, a petty action that threatens to doubly victimize Frazier for the loss of his job and injury to his children.

In January of last year, Bay City, Michigan, resident Marvin Schur was found frozen to death in his home, after the local utility cut off electricity without informing him. The official response to this came recently when Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm signed a new law making the regulations for utility shutoffs more uniform statewide, and which prevents some of the more egregious abuses by the utilities. As it stands, however, this response is wholly inadequate, and will not eliminate injuries and deaths from lack of access to utilities.

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