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Number of customers unable to pay bills up 41 percent from last year

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Thousands of financially strapped Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. customers overwhelmed by soaring bills continue to have their power shut off this summer.

Public Service Commission records show there were 3,200 turnoffs in July, the latest month available. That's a 41 percent increase from the number of households that lost their electricity due to non-payment last July.

BGE officials said they did not have information available on how many of the turnoffs were in Anne Arundel County.

BGE spokesman Kelly Shanefelter emphasized in an e-mail that "the majority of our 1.2 million customers are current on their bills. Approximately 9 to 15 percent of our customers are 30 days or more delinquent at any given time."

The Capital reported in an article earlier this summer that 5,000 delinquent customers had their power switched off at some point in the month of May.

Since then, the number has leveled at around 3,000 households per month.

The organizations that provide aid for people who can't pay the electric bill are concerned the worst is yet to come this year.

In Annapolis, Light House shelter for the homeless (development) Director Maryland Baker has seen people line up on her sidewalk several times this summer seeking help paying their bills.

Worried that the organization might overextend its funds, she's capped the number of people they help at 15 per month and won't give out more than \$2,000 in utilities aid each month.

"We're not seeing things get better," Mrs. Baker said. "And some of these people who are waiting, they get real emotional. It tends to be a very vicious circle as to what you're able to give of your income. If you have very limited resources, then sometimes it's a choice of paying utilities, the rent, the gas or food."

One woman waiting in line Monday arrived on the sidewalk in front of Light House at 5:30 a.m., three-and-a-half hours before the shelter officially opens for business. A handful of others came prepared with folding chairs while they waited in line.

Mrs. Baker said about three-fourths of the people the organization has assisted with utilities this fiscal year have jobs but still are struggling to pay their utility bills. Last month, Light House provided assistance to a local police officer and a few real estate agents, among other "white-collar" workers, she said.

Erica Matthews, director of energy programs at Community Action Partnership, a local nonprofit that advocates for low-income families, said an influx of people are coming to them for aid. As of this week, Ms. Matthews said appointments were already scheduled through the entire month of September.

"We try not to turn anyone away, though," Ms. Matthews said. "We're getting hundreds of applications in a day. That's in addition to the (walk-in) people waiting in our waiting room and the people coming into our Head Start offices."

Ms. Matthews said ratepayers should apply for aid as soon as they receive the first notice and not wait until after BGE has switched their power off.

"Once it's turned off, it's harder for us to help them because BGE wants the whole amount that's past-due before they restore the services, and sometimes that can be more than what the turn-off notice is," she said.

If turnoffs continue to be high, Ms. Shanefelter said BGE will react accordingly.

"BGE is always looking for ways to help our customers manage their energy bills," she said in a statement for *The Capital*. "We will continue to identify opportunities to assist them, including hosting energy-assistance events, conservation workshops and participating in other community outreach efforts. Additionally, we are committed to working with the (Public Service Commission) to expand our Smart Energy Savers Program."