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Thousands seek help with soaring electric bills

Anne Arundel sees sharpest increase in Maryland

By [ELISHA SAUERS](#), Staff Writer

Anne Arundel County has seen a staggering increase this year in the number of residents seeking state aid to pay their electric bills.

In fiscal 2008, which ended in June, 4,324 county residents applied for help, a 38-percent jump from 2007. That was the biggest increase of any county in the state.

In addition, in the first five months of this year, Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. has disconnected about 12,000 of its customers statewide for failure to pay their bills, with 5,000 of them occurring in May alone. By comparison, there were 900 disconnections in May 2007.

This all comes in a summer when BGE customers are taking an even bigger hit than previously anticipated. Though early predictions in January estimated BGE bills would increase by 5.5 percent, this season Marylanders are experiencing a 7.6-percent hike. That comes on the heels of the 72-percent increase ushered in during the past few years by deregulation of the state's electric utilities.

A scene that unfolded Monday morning on West Street in Annapolis reflected the hardships behind those numbers.

At 7:45 a.m., 45 struggling ratepayers lined up at The Annapolis Light House Shelter for the Homeless, hoping to get to the front of the line more than an hour before the doors opened. Every first and third Monday of the month, Light House provides financial help for those with delinquency notices or in danger of power turn-offs.

It wasn't the usual crowd you'd find in front of a homeless shelter. A nurse, a recently laid-off real estate agent, a retail employee, a mother from Montgomery County and another from Prince George's County were among those hoping for a miracle so they could keep the lights on.

"This was the most amount of people I've seen waiting that early in the morning," said Light House managing director Crystal Brownlee. "We had to turn people away because we just don't have enough money to go around."

Last year, the shelter doled out \$34,985 to nearly 300 people through its program. But lately the funds for the shelter's program aren't enough for the number of people seeking help.

In fact, because the Light House serves recipients on a first-come, first-served basis, 30 of those in Monday's line were referred to other agencies or nonprofits with comparable programs, some in other counties.

Light House is a privately funded organization, and the staff is accustomed to assisting Anne Arundel County residents. They've never had so many pleas for help from such varying ZIP codes and lifestyles.

It's an occurrence that's becoming more frequent statewide. The shortage of funds to aid struggling Maryland ratepayers and residents who already have lost their power has created a shuffling of the needy, sending many from one office to another, all over the state.

Ella Bacot of Israel Baptist Church in Baltimore, which also provides financial assistance for BGE bills, said the church has had a similar experience as Light House. They're receiving phone calls from people needing help with their electric bills from all over the state, whereas once the interest was mostly concentrated within Baltimore.

The rising demand has put a strain on the church's charitable funds.

"We're sort of out of funds right now, but we're thinking we'll get some more later — hopefully soon," Ms. Bacot said.

For now, Israel Baptist is trying to give people advice on where to try next.

Ms. Brownlee said the Light House staff also makes sure people walk away with referrals for other resources, but laments that she can't do more.

"It bothers me a lot that we can't help everyone," Ms. Brownlee said. "I think about it a lot, you know. So what's going to happen to that mother I had to turn away?"

WHERE TO GET HELP

- Payment arrangements with the utility or disputes: Public Service Commission of Maryland, 410-767-8028
- Energy assistance programs:
 - Anne Arundel County Community Action Partnership, 410-626-1900
 - Special funds or charitable local funds: Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services, 410-269-4600
 - Emergency grants: Anne Arundel County Department of Aging/Disability, 410-222-4464
 - Private charity: Salvation Army, 410-768-0477
 - Federal Emergency Management Agency funds: Anne Arundel County Community Action Partnership, 410-626-1900
 - More resources and information on ratepayer rights: Maryland People's Counsel, 410-767-8150

— *Source: Office of Home Energy Programs*

Bisa Delgado, 34 and a single mother to an 11-year-old son, never thought she would need help paying her electric bill. But she, too, found herself waiting in a line this week at the Department of Social Services.

A snapshot of Ms. Delgado this winter would have captured a successful marketing executive, living well in an Odenton condominium on a \$70,000 salary. Her power bills were coming in at more than \$200 per month — double what her bills averaged last summer — but she had the money to pay.

That middle-income comfort quickly ended in April after she, along with several other coworkers in her department, received a pink slip.

Each day after being laid off, her job search was fruitless, and each day the bills continued to pile. A self-described independent woman, she had to swallow her pride when she received another pink piece of paper. It was from BGE, and it said a service worker would soon knock on her door to switch off her power.

"I was there when the guy turned it off, and I was begging," she remembered. "I said, 'Please, you don't have to do this. Please, don't do this.' "

She reluctantly called her mother in Tacoma Park, who then charged the outstanding bills to her credit card, and within two hours, the house was relit.

The power may be on, but life is not as it once was. On Friday, she waited in a crowded DSS lobby to ask for child-care vouchers, temporary cash assistance and unemployment advice.

Because of her current misfortunes, the past few weeks have been filled with some of the most difficult conversations Ms. Delgado ever has had to have with her son.

"I sheltered him somewhat when he was little," she said, "but I'm up front with him now. I have to be. I said, 'Sorry, babe, you can't watch cable anymore or play on the computer. We gotta trim the fat.' "

John Reio, 51, received his delinquency notice three months ago, owes BGE \$900 in back bills and hopes to God the electric company will cut him and his wife some slack.

SEEKING HELP

Percentage of increase in bill payment assistance applications

since last year:

Anne Arundel County:	37.8
Calvert County:	31.6
St. Mary's County:	24.5
Prince George's County:	23.7
Carroll County:	22
Charles County:	19.4
Montgomery County:	18.9
Baltimore City:	18.2
Frederick County:	17.7
Queen Anne's County:	17.6
Howard County:	14.3
Baltimore County:	14
Harford County:	13.1
Cecil County:	12.3
Talbot County:	10.1
Dorchester County:	9.4
Worcester County:	9
Caroline County:	8
Somerset County:	7.9
Kent County:	3.3
Washington County:	3.1
Allegany County:	2.9
Garrett County:	2.4
Wicomico County:	1.5

—Source: Department of Human

Resources

The two have been married since she was 15 and he was 17, and though they've endured a lot through the years, this may be their roughest patch. Mr. Reio is in a wheelchair because of an accident during a recent hip replacement surgery in which a major artery was severed, causing him to lose all sensation in his right lower leg. His wife had a major heart attack five years ago and breathes with the aid of an oxygen machine.

With neither able to work nor get around easily, Mr. Reio said the escalating bills from BGE are just too much for them to handle.

"I called (BGE) and said, 'Look, this is my situation.' I was honest with them," he said. "They said they'd have to investigate."

BGE numbers

BGE spokesman Linda Foy said the company's average delinquency rate has only increased by 2 percent this month over June 2007 and has remained between 9 and 15 percent of its current customers, which the company considers a "normal" range.

"I cannot speak for (other organizations) or what they are seeing. I can only tell you what our numbers show," Ms. Foy wrote in an e-mail to the *The Capital* on Tuesday.

BGE expects about 30,000 of its customers statewide this year will have their power disconnected for failure to pay. That's 7,000 more disconnections than last year.

But Ms. Foy said the numbers don't necessarily indicate a rising trend.

"I would caution against drawing any conclusions about why the number is up when 2007 and 2008 are compared since it was actually higher in 2006 than it was in 2007," she said.

According to BGE's records, the number of its customers who were "eligible" for turn-off from the beginning of January through June has totaled 1 million, with 15,000 actually losing their power.

Ms. Foy said BGE tries to keep disconnection as a last resort. "We continue to work with customers on payment arrangements and encourage anyone having trouble paying their bill to contact us in advance of receiving a turn-off notice or having service terminated," she said.

Since electricity deregulation and BGE's implementation of a 72-percent rate increase, ratepayers have struggled to acclimate to the rising expense, some believing it the insult to the economic slowdown's injury.

Gov. Martin O'Malley negotiated and finalized a settlement agreement with BGE's umbrella company, Constellation Energy, during the last General Assembly session, but the one-time, \$170 rebate for 1.1 million BGE customers has provided households little relief in light of the continuing rate increases.

The state agencies

"I'm not surprised to hear that nonprofits and churches are having to turn away people because of not enough funding to go around," said Paula Carmody of the Office of the People's Counsel.

State-funded programs like the Electric Universal Service Program, for which Anne Arundel County residents have shown the greatest increase in applicants in the past year, already are being stretched, Ms. Carmody said.

With the recent end of fiscal 2008, statewide applications to the Office of Home Energy Programs increased by more than 15 percent, the greatest year of growth in inquiries since the program began.

Despite the prediction of 8 percent more applicants for fiscal 2009 and the department's requests to the Public Service Commission to expand its funding, its budget will remain at \$36 million for bill payment assistance, the same amount allotted to the program as last year. Though Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation officials say Maryland's economy is strong and stable compared with the majority of other states, the rise of power and fossil fuel prices is taking its biggest toll on the households working on tight budgets, with slim wiggle-room for disposable income.

"Now they're having to dip into what they have saved, and they're running out of money, basically," said Andy Moser, DLLR assistant secretary. "And the higher the cost goes, the more people who will fall into that realm."

In her eight years of employment with Light House, Ms. Brownlee said this is the most need she has ever observed, but she fears the worst is yet to come.

"I put myself in their position," she said. "First of all, you get humiliated standing in line out there, and then when you get turned away, it's just another slap in the face."