

With Utility Bills Up, Aid Programs Feel the Heat

By [Mary Otto](#)

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It's early morning in [Annapolis](#) when the line starts forming. At 9 a.m., two dozen people are huddled in the March chill.

Once a month, the Light House Shelter for the Homeless helps with electric and gas bills. These days, not only the poor, but members of the struggling middle class are clutching power company shut-off notices as they seek help. The line includes an accountant, a health-care worker in her scrubs and a real estate agent.

Shelter director Crystal Brownlee listens to each person's plea in the privacy of her tiny office. Many of the bills are hundreds of dollars in arrears. She can offer each person about \$100.

"What I can give them can't touch what they really need," Brownlee said.

The rising cost of utilities and the growing number of people struggling to light, heat and cool their homes have dramatically stretched the resources of energy assistance programs and charities, said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association.

"We've always had the very poor coming in for assistance," Wolfe said. "What is different now is that we have more working-class people requesting assistance than before."



"What I can give them can't touch what they really need," Crystal Brownlee says of the money she hands out each month to help people cover utility bills. (By Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post)

In the Washington region, major electric utilities have raised rates an average of 47 percent since 2001. Gas heat costs more, too. In 2002, the average Marylander paid \$789 annually for gas to heat a home; by 2007, the price was up to \$1,218. For Virginians, the price of heating a home went from \$851 in 2002 to \$1,131 in 2007. The average District resident paid \$852 in 2002 and \$1,209 in 2007.

The Light House Shelter, operated by churches, relies on donations to run the housing emergency program. Before utility bills got so big and so many people came asking for help, Brownlee "could give \$200 or pay some bills in full," she recalls. Now Brownlee finds herself parceling out help in increments that often do not make a dent. And she knows, on this morning, that her small emergency assistance fund, which used to last most of the month, will be gone in two hours.

At Pepco, about 153,000 residential accounts were in arrears in January, a 16 percent increase over the same month last year, a company spokesman said. At [Baltimore Gas and Electric](#), one in eight accounts is delinquent, up from one in 12, a spokeswoman said.

This year, applications for assistance to the state are up by more than 11,000, or nearly 12 percent over last year. "We're really getting slammed," said Ralph Markus, acting director of Maryland's Office of Home Energy Programs.

Like all states and the District, [Maryland](#) receives an annual block grant and other funds through the federal [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#), or LIHEAP, to help needy households.

Markus estimated that Maryland will spend all \$33.7 million for fiscal 2008 but reach only 30 percent of people potentially eligible for the help. The problem is shared by other states, he said.

In the District, the same heating assistance program that served 24,000 applicants last year expects to serve as many as 30,000 this year, said George Hawkins, director of the D.C. Department of the Environment. The program, which has a \$21 million budget, reaches about 50 percent of eligible households.

"That still means 50 percent don't get it," Hawkins said.

In [Virginia](#), requests were up but less dramatically, 108,000 this year, compared with 105,000 last year, officials said.

Needs remain, said Terry Martin, weatherization program manager for the Rural Areas Development Association, which serves southwestern Virginia. "They have a LIHEAP program, but the people I've talked to say it's just not enough. I know families who have had to move in with relatives because their power has been shut off or they are short of fuel."

The Bush administration, citing the need for states to reduce administrative costs associated with LIHEAP and to improve outreach to needy families, has proposed spending less on the program in the coming fiscal year, earmarking \$2 billion in block grants and contingency funds, down from \$2.57 billion. The reduction would mean millions less in energy assistance for the region.

At the Light House, the last person Crystal Brownlee can help on this morning, the 18th in the line, is the real estate agent, who hasn't sold a thing lately.

"You want to buy a house?" the young woman asks Brownlee, embarrassed to be seeking utility assistance.

"I'll give you \$100 toward your bill," Brownlee tells her, knowing that the amount won't come close to settling the woman's account. "Try Holy Family," she adds, suggesting a church that might be able to provide a little more.

And with that, Brownlee's \$2,000 in monthly emergency assistance funds is gone.

She has to tell the small knot of people at the end of the line she cannot help them.

Most walk away wearily. One woman is angry and starts shouting.

"I'd love for us to be able to get more money," Brownlee said, "so I don't have to turn anybody away."