

Families Cut Back to Meet Rising Heat, Electricity Bills

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RINGWOOD -- Gina Solari's five children will have to say goodbye for now to their online friends and favorite television shows.

The Ringwood resident is rolling out measures she hopes will save her family money. In the process, she is also reducing the amount of energy she uses. Under the new regime, no lights will be on when a room is empty and the thermostat will not waver from 65 degrees, Solari said Tuesday.

"I'm super, super conserving right now," said Solari, who receives help to cover the bills through a state program for low-income residents. "I am constantly shutting the lights off after the kids."

With energy costs expected to increase this winter, families on tight budgets like Solari's are being forced to cut back to save money. Those efforts -- whether they include changing the types of lights used in a home or installing new insulation -- are not only good for the pocketbooks, but can also be environmentally sound, according to New Jersey's Clean Energy Program. Such energy-conscious families are also finding help from federal and state governments with the mounting bills.

The federal Energy Information Administration reported this week that consumers in the Northeast are expected to spend on average \$513 more this winter season to heat their homes using heating oil; \$431 more for propane; \$105 more for natural gas; and \$60 more for electricity. The agency considers October 1 to March 31 as the winter period.

Spending on home heating oil was expected to see the largest increase -- 34.2 percent -- because of the high cost of crude oil, said Tancred Lidderdale, a senior economist at the administration in Washington, D.C.

"Everybody is going to get hit in the pocketbook, whether it's households or businesses," Lidderdale said.

Although the price of crude oil, which was \$87.72 per barrel on Tuesday, is expected to decrease during the winter, Lidderdale said that the consumer prices are not expected to be significantly affected.

"We expect prices to start easing, but we don't see any significant improvement until later next year at the earliest. But we are always hopeful," he said.

Solari, who takes home about \$420 per week from her job as a baker, participates in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program or LIHEAP. The federally funded program offers assistance with heating and cooling bills to low-income families and the elderly. Also, through the weatherization program, Solari's furnace was replaced a few months ago with one that will allow her to save up to 15 percent on her heating bills, according to Carol Ryle, who coordinates the home energy, universal service fund and weatherization program in part of Passaic County.

Through LIHEAP, Solari receives a \$221 credit for heating costs, and another \$90 each month to offset gas and electrical bills, Ryle said.

"If it weren't for them, I'd be in trouble," Solari said.

Last year, the state LIHEAP program served 180,121 households, Chris Donnelly, a spokesman for the Department of Community Affairs, which administers the program, said in an e-mail Tuesday. But less than half of the people who qualified for the program applied for it last year, according to the agency.

Although data is not yet available for this year, local managers of LIHEAP and other state energy assistance programs said they expected to see the number of applicants increase because of the high energy prices.

Ryle projected on Tuesday that she would have 200 more applicants than she had last year.

Ryle, who is based in Totowa, said the program normally does not make emergency heating oil distributions until mid-January, but so far this year, her office had already made arrangements for 25 families to receive emergency deliveries.

In Passaic, Amanda Vazquez, supervisor of the city's home energy assistance program, said that in November alone more than 1,000 people applied.

Donnelly, the DCA spokesman, said Wednesday that the emergency assistance program, which delivers heating fuels to qualified homes, started earlier this winter season "in order to help people cope with the high price of heating fuels." A family can receive up to \$800 to purchase emergency heating fuel, Donnelly said.

Officials said that despite the high energy costs, there are steps -- big and small -- consumers can take to save money and energy. They can include replacing regular incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent ones that use 75 percent less energy, setting thermostats to 68 degrees during the day and to 60 degrees at night or when no one is at home, redoing insulations, incorporating renewable energy sources into the home, and conducting a home energy assessment, said the clean energy program's Anne Marie McShae.

Solari is taking the suggestions to heart.

In January, Solari said she plans to install a digital thermostat in the house and replace the lights in her home with compact fluorescent light bulbs.

"I think that we are saving some money," she said.