

Families try to conserve, still feel pinched

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Christina Campos turns the heat off at night and limits her morning shower to five minutes. She pulls on a sweat shirt when her house feels chilly. She uses a cold-cycle wash for the dirty clothes that her children shed like autumn leaves.

Still, Campos, a single mom, struggles to keep up with her electricity costs. Last spring, her overdue bills piled up and her utility shut off the power to her modest Gervais home. She and her family spent a week at a friend's house while she secured emergency financial aid, paid her past-due account and got reconnected.

"I'm caught up now, and I want to stay that way," said Campos, a quiet, resolute woman of 37 who earns \$10.80 an hour as an outreach worker for the Oregon Health Plan and has three children at home, all teenagers. "But it's really hard with just one income coming in."

As home heating costs climb, more and more low-income Oregonians are making painful choices about which bills to pay and which necessities to do without. Many, already receiving government aid such as food stamps, fear they will have to vie for increasingly stretched supplies of emergency bill-paying money.

The pain runs the gamut of household fuel sources -- electricity, natural gas, heating oil, even wood.

Michelle Sledge lives on Main Street in Dallas, west of Salem, in a house purchased with her husband 10 years ago; she has since divorced. She works part time and brings home, at most, \$850 a month, she said. Her house payments are \$670 a month.

"One month, I pay the power bill, the next my mortgage," said Sledge, 28. "I can't pay both at the same time."

Natural gas heats her home, but she said she hasn't turned it on yet -- and won't, unless temperatures drop dramatically.

"I can't afford it," said Sledge, who remembers paying natural gas bills of \$300 during the winter months last year. "I'll bundle up instead."

She uses heating pads to warm her two young sons at night. She wears sweat clothes to bed, and her children don long johns.

David and Edwina Dent rent a home in North Portland and dread the thought of winter.

"We're not ready at all," said Edwina, who had a baby, her third child, in January.

Their home has oil heat, and the tank is empty, like the Dents' bank account.

Oil heating costs take a particular toll on the poor because deliveries generally require upfront, in-full payments.

"I'm afraid to even call" to find out the price per gallon, said Edwina Dent, 25, who, like her husband, is unemployed.

Last year, a state survey of oil distributors pegged the September price at \$1.76 a gallon for a 200-gallon delivery. This September, it stood at \$2.62, a 48 percent increase. Late last week: \$2.97 a gallon.

Dent remembers paying about \$600 for oil last year. Based on the September survey prices, she faces a bill of almost \$900 this winter.

"Maybe I can come up with \$100 and fill the tank a little bit at a time," she said.

Last spring, when Bruce and Sarah Coleman bought a small two-story home in Dallas they laid down the law for themselves and their four children: Don't turn on the electric baseboard heaters.

"I absolutely refuse to use them," said Coleman, 30, a friend and co-worker of Sledge. "I'm scared of the cost."

Instead, the family will warm themselves by a wood stove. Scrap wood serves as fuel for the time being. The Colemans don't have the \$180 or more it will take to buy a cord of wood.

Meanwhile, unpaid electric bills accumulate. The Colemans expect a shutoff notice any day. Sarah will use the warning to qualify for emergency aid from the state. She hopes a federal program will give her some money for that stack of wood.

Sarah Coleman works full time at a group home in Salem, caring for mentally and developmentally disabled residents. She makes \$9.31 an hour. Husband Bruce, disabled in a car accident in 1989, recently began looking for a job, but hasn't yet found one.

"We've got to make it work," Sarah said. "Winter's coming. It's raining. I've got four kids to keep warm."

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