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Demand for LIHEAP heating up

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As winter refuses to relinquish its grip on the region, the demand for help in paying home-heating bills continues to remain strong.

“A lot of years we see that this time of year the demand for our services starts going down,” said Nancy Kane-Richards of Elgin-based Community Contacts Inc., which administers energy-assistance programs in Kane and DeKalb counties.

“But this year, that’s not the case at all.”

Since Sept. 1, 2007, CCI has processed requests for assistance from just more than 5,000 households in Kane and DeKalb counties through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

That number includes more than 4,000 households from Kane County, Kane-Richards said.

But as the cold persists into the late winter and perhaps into the early spring, Kane-Richards said the program likely would see more than 10,000 requests for LIHEAP assistance.

Last year, the agency processed requests from 9,000 households for help in paying home-heating and electric bills.

“We’re at about 4 [percent] to 5 percent more now than we were at this time last year,” Kane-Richards said.

CCI was allocated \$3.5 million in September from the \$150 million originally set aside for LIHEAP in Illinois by the federal and state governments.

However, the agency, as well as all other LIHEAP administrative organizations, will receive a little more to deal with the increased demand.

Last week, LIHEAP in Illinois announced that it had received an additional \$29 million to be distributed through the energy-assistance programs.

Kane-Richards said she did not know how much CCI would receive from the new distribution.

But she said her agency would be fully funded to help with all eligible assistance requests through May 31.

She said she expected a crush of requests later this spring, as consumers who have fallen behind in paying their utility bills face disconnections.

Under Illinois law, utilities are prohibited from disconnecting customers between Dec. 1 and March 31 when temperatures are lower than 32 degrees.

Kane-Richards said her agency already had doled out LIHEAP assistance to 647 households in Kane and DeKalb counties who have been disconnected or are facing imminent disconnection.

Kane-Richards pinned the hardship on a combination of sustained cold weather and high natural-gas and electricity costs.

Nicor, for instance, is charging 87 cents a therm for natural gas this month, an increase of 15 cents a therm compared with February 2007.

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