

HEATING / Hundreds of local residents having trouble paying high bills

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program coordinator.

On March 7, Indiana Gas sent 186 county residents disconnect notices, Anderson said. Another 422 will receive a disconnect notice on their next bill.

And 334 others are behind on their payment and are at risk of receiving a disconnect notice.

Requests for assistance are expected to far exceed those made in 2000, when LUM paid for 44 reconnect fees, Anderson said. She said she saw a woman several weeks ago whose Social Security monthly income was \$415, and she already owed \$587 on her gas bill.

"I don't know if she'll ever get

that paid off," Anderson said. "It's very scary."

Residents who are in the four-county Area IV region but outside Fairfield Township should contact Area IV for more information on assistance.

Fairfield Township households should first go to Area IV to determine whether they qualify for assistance if they have received a disconnection notice from Indiana Gas, the electric company or the water company.

If this assistance is not enough to restore or maintain utility service, they should contact the Fairfield township assessor, who will direct them to LUM and the Salvation Army for additional help.

A copy of the disconnect letter

will be required before the applicant can access further funding through Area IV. For assistance with electric and water bills, the applicant must meet income eligibility of 150 percent of poverty guideline.

They also must show documentation of prior two months of income for all employed household members.

Roeder also encouraged residents who cannot pay their Indiana Gas bill to contact the company to discuss an extended payment plan.

Rep. Sheila Klinker, D-Lafayette, supports giving sales tax on utility bills back to the customers. Not only are poor families suffering, but also all people

are affected by the increase in gas prices, she said.

State law protects low-income customers receiving state assistance from having their utility service disconnected for nonpayment between Dec. 1 and March 15. NIPSCO, Indiana Gas, SIGECO/Vectren and Citizens Gas indicated to O'Bannon that they intend to voluntarily extend that protection through the end of March.

"This winter is just a preview of what is to come," said Chris Williams, executive direction of Citizens Action Coalition. "The era of cheap gas for home heating is over."

— Contributing: Shannon Lohrmann/Journal and Courier

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