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## Waiting for the heating bill

*By Mike Boyer*

*mboyer@enquirer.com*

Home owners in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky are bracing for higher heating bills this month after a string of 12 consecutive days of temperatures below normal ended Wednesday.

Duke Energy, which provides natural gas to about half a million customers in Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky, said gas consumption during the first 10 days of this month increased 18 percent from the same period last year, reflecting the sharply colder temperatures.

The utility said the average daily temperature through the first 10 days this month was 17 degrees compared with 34 degrees in the same period last year.

Spokeswoman Sally Thelen said total gas demand during the first 10 days this month equaled about eight percent of the total gas consumption in the region through all of 2009.

Thelen couldn't provide data on what the cold snap would mean for the average residential customer's gas bills this month. But she said gas rates this year are about a third less than a year ago, which should ease the impact on customers' budgets.

In Ohio, Duke's gas cost, excluding delivery charges, for the typical customer using 7,000 cubic feet of gas is \$50.23 this month compared with \$68.15 in January last year.

Individual bills vary based on when the monthly billing cycle ends, whether a bill was estimated or from a meter reading and how low customers keep their thermostat. But Thelen said it's possible some customers' bills could be lower this month than a year ago despite the colder temperatures.

That's little comfort to community action agencies on both sides of the Ohio River who report sharp increases in demand for emergency heating assistance from low-income residents.

Jennifer Belisle, deputy director of the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission, which serves eight counties, said the agency has provide more than \$371,000 in emergency heating assistance to 1,330 households since Jan. 4. The Cincinnati/ Hamilton County Community Action Agency has said demand for heating assistance is up about 55 percent from a year ago.

The federal government on Tuesday released \$54 million in Ohio and \$13.9 million in Kentucky for their low-income heating assistance program.

Belisle said because the emergency, or crisis, heating assistance is a one-time payment, based on income, the sharp increase in demand now could cause hardships if the cold weather returns later in the heating season.

Regulations in Ohio and Kentucky limit a utility's ability to shut-off customers who are behind in their bills during cold weather. Thelen said Duke suspends shutoffs when average temperatures are below 25 degrees. Still, Belisle said a major portion of her agency's client's rely on non- utility fuel sources such as heating oil , wood and coal.

Complicating the problem, she said, is that many of her agency's clients live in older homes with poor heating systems and little or no insulation.

Since Thanksgiving, about 18 of the weatherization projects her agency has undertaken involved families relying on space heaters or kerosene heaters to keep warm, she said.

## Additional Facts

What about your bill?

Have you received your heating bill this month? Was it higher or lower than you expected? Share your stories with us. E-mail staff writer Mike Boyer at [mboyer@enquirer.com](mailto:mboyer@enquirer.com)

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