

the **ct** mirror

Nonprofit says 40 percent of CT families can't afford winter heating bills

By [Keith M. Phaneuf](#) Thursday, November 14, 2013

Nearly 40 percent of Connecticut households can't afford to pay their energy bills this winter as aid from the federal government shrinks, according to a new report from a nonprofit advocacy group.

Operation Fuel also said these households will face, on average, \$2,363 in bills they won't be able to pay this winter.

"Many Connecticut families are being forced to choose between paying their energy expenses or paying for food and other basic necessities," Patricia Wrice, Operation Fuel's executive director, said Thursday during a news conference in the Legislative Office Building.

The nonprofit's annual study on winter energy needs focused on an estimated 295,000 families with annual earnings below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, that is less than \$47,100, and for an individual, that's less than \$22,980.

The report concluded that households above the poverty level typically use no more than 6 percent of their annual earnings to pay energy bills. Energy costs that require more than 6 percent of income are considered "unaffordable."

For those below the poverty level, winter energy costs that will exceed 6 percent of earnings total almost \$700 million, or \$2,363 per household.

Public assistance covers about 11 percent of that gap. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, which is administered by the state and fueled primarily with federal dollars, will allocate \$76 million this winter.

Operation Fuel, which raises funds through a donor program promoted on monthly utility bills, expects to provide \$3 million in energy aid.

But many affected residents will find their own solution, sacrificing meals or prescription medication, or keeping heat levels dangerously low.

And though state law blocks utilities from shutting off heating services between November and April, that doesn't eliminate the debt delinquent families owe. It also means many poor families lose their energy service in May, when utilities legally can shut off power.



"Many Connecticut families are being forced to choose between paying their energy expenses or paying for food and other basic necessities," said Patricia Wrice, Operation Fuel director, right. Sen. Robert Duff, D-Norwalk, is seated at left.

"How can a child do their homework in the dark or in the cold?" asked Alice Rosenthal, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy at the Medical-Legal Partnership Project.

The Hartford-based center advocates for the legal rights for children facing abuse, including the lack of access to basic needs.

Rosenthal said increasing numbers of Connecticut children live in "energy insecurity" and face higher rates of hospitalization, respiratory disease, general poor health and psychiatric distress.

"We should all take pause with that," said Sen. Robert Duff, D-Norwalk, who co-chairs the legislature's Energy and Technology Committee. "We should all say that is unacceptable."

One solution to close the energy assistance gap, Wrice said, is for Connecticut to join dozens of other states in mandating utilities to offer discounts to low-income households.

Duff said his panel would discuss the idea, but didn't take a position on it.

Source URL: <http://www.ctmirror.org/node/144231>