

## [ Poor Get Poorer ]

# Out in the Cold

Hartford area fuel banks predict unprecedented cold this winter, as they run out of money from the government

By Meir Rinde

**T**he stories that Rosa Santiago tells can chill the heart. There's the story of the 80-year-old man with Alzheimer's disease, lying in bed in an ice-cold house while his wife sat weeping at Santiago's desk.

And the story of the single mom and four kids, huddled in their kitchen in January, with pots of boiling water on the stove providing the apartment's only heat.

Santiago expects to hear more desperate stories in the next few months. She is the coordinator at MANNA Assistance and Advocacy, a program of City Center Churches that helps poor Hartford residents pay for heating fuel, among other services that help people in crisis get back on their feet.

"It's a struggle," Santiago said Monday. "This year's going to be worse than last year."

The state's fuel assistance banks are bracing for a brutal season. Last winter's chill drained home oil tanks and agency budgets, and the federal government is on track to give Connecticut \$6 million less for fuel aid this year.

Unless Congress moves fast — which no one expects to happen around election time — the state may zero out funding that would have helped more than 13,000 households that are poor but above the poverty line.

In the absence of funding from the state's Contingency Heating Assistance Program (CHAP), nonprofits are scrambling to raise money from charitable groups and from utility companies, which collect donations via voluntary bill check-offs and give matching funds.

Meanwhile, the cost of getting a home oil tank filled has skyrocketed about 70 percent in the last year, which will make it difficult for agencies to give struggling families enough money to make it even part way through the winter.

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"We normally give \$250, and last year we raised it to \$300," said Pat Wrice, executive director of the Bloomfield nonprofit Operation Fuel. "Now if we give \$250, people will get less than half a tank. If we respond to the need, we'll serve fewer people, unless we get more money. I don't think we'll get enough money."

Operation Fuel, a crisis-driven network of 61 local social service agencies and fuel banks, like MANNA, doled out \$703,000 in fuel assistance to those organizations last year, helping 5,000 households statewide. More than two-thirds of the money came from the CHAP program. Anticipating the loss of that contribution from the state, Wrice has been busy shuttling from Rotary Club meeting to utility company office, urging potential donors to dig deep and give generously.

Wrice said the state's Congressional delegation and Gov. Jodi Rell are pushing for more funding, which could come as part of a pending federal bill to aid Florida hurricane victims. Rell said earlier this month that the state may take the unusual step of using its general fund to bail out fuel assistance programs.

"I don't think charitable dollars can ever replace public dollars," Wrice said. "That was not the intent of our program. We weren't supposed to replace public assistance. We were supposed to help people who fall between the cracks."

**A** further crisis could surface in April, when utility companies will start shutting off gas and electricity to customers who are past due, Wrice said. Unless the feds or the state come through, it's hard to see how any assistance money could remain in the spring.

For those below the poverty line, the state will continue to provide assistance, though less than in the past and nothing to meet higher fuel costs. About 66,000 households, including 19,000 in Hartford and Middlesex counties, got help last year.

"An award will be worth less," said Liz Dupont-Diehl, a senior planner at the nonprofit Community Renewal Team, which funnels state money to needy families. "It won't go as far."

Having to suddenly pay much higher fuel bills could blindsides many poor urban families, Dupont-Diehl said. "For a lot of the working poor that we service, they're not on an oil company budget plan," she said. "They're working, they're making ends meet, and the winter heating bill comes along and blows them away." ■