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Heat Assistance Need Nearly Doubles

Cold, Economy Forcing More To Ask For Help

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CINCINNATI -- The bitter cold temperatures this week could get dangerous for families who can't afford to keep their heat on.

In fact, the number of people who need heat assistance has nearly doubled this winter because of the bad economy.

Families are doing whatever they can to keep their heat on.

Sharon Larkin said her two children are too young to know what money problems are, "but they know when it's cold. She knows when it's cold and when it's hot. I don't want her saying, 'Mommy, I'm cold.' I couldn't have that."

However, Larkin is unemployed and struggling to keep the heat on. She said she's less than two days away from having it turned off.

Larkin turned to the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Community Action Agency for help.

So far this year almost 7,000 families have gotten assistance from its Home Energy Assistance Program, up 55 percent from last year.

"The need has changed. Individuals that typically would not have to ask for our services now have to. It's the busiest I've ever seen it," HEAP manager Robin Avant said.

That means it's not just an inner city problem any more. The newest office in Forest Park opened just a few months ago, and managers said it is their busiest.

"Knowing that they're warm and fine, and in a safe environment, and don't have to worry about the cold, it means everything to me," Avant said.

The organization changed to a walk-in system this year. That means there are no appointments and the agency is first come, first serve.

That's created some big crowds first thing in the morning, but also allowed them to serve more people than they have in the past.

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