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## Sagging economy behind rise in utility shutoffs

**By Nate Legue****BusinessRockford.com**

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ROCKFORD — Record-high energy prices and a depressed economy are combining to create a surge in utility shutoffs locally and throughout the Midwest.

In Illinois, the state's heating assistance program has seen so many applicants that it ran out of money a month early, said Mark Bixby, energy director for the City of Rockford, which administers the state aid in Winnebago and Boone counties.

"We are seeing and have seen over the past five years a pretty dramatic increase in the number of people who are coming to us because they've been disconnected or are in danger of disconnection," said Bixby.

This winter, the city provided \$3.9 million in state-funded aid to 8,500 households through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. When Bixby started administering the program 15 years ago, about 1,000 households would apply each year, he said.

"We had more than 1,000 appointments booked through the end of April when the state called a month ago to say it was out of money," Bixby said Friday. "We estimated we could have spend another \$1 million."

The extent of the problem is becoming apparent now because most states in the Midwest and Northeast have moratoriums on utility disconnections in winter months.

In Illinois, natural gas providers are not allowed to shut off heat unless the temperature has been above 32 degrees for at least 24 hours, said Richard Caragol, spokesman for Naperville-based Illinois natural gas provider Nicor. Families eligible for state heating assistance can't have their service shut off until March 31, said Jim Chilsen, spokesman for the Citizens Utility Board, a utility watchdog group created by the Illinois Legislature.

The problem of past-due home-heating bills is hitting other cold-weather states. For Minneapolis-based Xcel Energy, customer balances owed are up 10 percent in Minnesota and 20 percent in Wisconsin, said credit policy manager Pat Boland.

"Obviously the economy is playing a very big role in the disposable income that folks have," he said. Another factor: Cold weather added 7 percent to 8 percent to this year's bills.

In Iowa a record \$40 million was owed by 226,670 delinquent customers of rate-regulated utilities in March, said Jerry McKim of Iowa's Bureau of Energy Assistance.

Nicor disconnects between 40,000 to 60,000 households a year in Illinois, all caused by delinquent payment, said Caragol. Nicor was unable to provide more specific disconnection figures before this article's deadline.

*USA Today contributed to this report.*

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