



Nicor offering program for defaulting customers

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Naperville-based Nicor Gas is offering its first-ever payment program for defaulting customers, requesting at least half the money in order to reconnect their service before winter.

As of August, Nicor had a total of 66,000 disconnections, compared to 41,000 during the same period last year. This means Nicor's debt from unpaid bills could increase to about \$60 million this year, compared to about \$53 million in 2007, said Nicor spokeswoman Annette Martinez.

"We recognize it's a sagging economy and energy costs are high," said Martinez. "We see that in our disconnection numbers and need to offer our customers something to help them reconnect."

The program, called Reconnect Assistance, will run from Monday through Sept. 19. It offers eligible participants, who owe less than \$3,000, a chance to pay at least 50 percent of the balance and go on a payment plan to pay off the balance. Currently, customers who have been disconnected for non-payment are required to pay their outstanding bill in full before service is restored.

To sign up, call 1-888-Nicor4U (642-6748).

If executed properly, this new program is a good step forward, said Citizens Utility Board spokesman Jim Chilsen.

"However, it's also disturbing in light of Nicor's \$140 million rate-hike request," said Chilsen. "A good way to help seniors and hard-working families would be to stop asking for exorbitant rate hikes."

Nicor has a rate increase request pending before the Illinois Commerce Commission, which could decide by March.

Yet it's important for the utility to help its customers, said Mark Barnett, an associate equity analyst at Morningstar Inc. in Chicago.

"This program is a prudent and thoughtful way of addressing a common problem that gas utilities face," said Barnett.

"While the federal government's LIHEAP program provides assistance to customers who can't afford to pay their bills, there are many who do not qualify but have a difficult time with their bills nonetheless. It is hard for a utility to justify leaving such customers without heat for their home for the winter season, regardless of the situation."