

Homeowners look for ways to reduce energy costs

Number of people needing utility assistance is up this year, officials say

BY BRADFORD PEARSON | STAFF WRITER

In the 15 years Bruce and Shannon Russell have lived in their Bethesda home, their second-floor bedroom has always been too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter.

Some parts of the 52-year-old Cape Cod are drafty, and the ceiling to the attic isn't insulated as well as it should be. And with winter — and high gas bills — around the corner, the Russells thought it was time to do something.

Throughout the county, economic hardships and climbing energy rates have placed a considerable strain on family utility bills. Residents at all income levels are looking for different ways to deal with high energy costs, from making their homes more energy efficient to finding help covering bills.

County and area nonprofit representatives said they have seen an upswing in families asking for utility assistance this year, some just needing a few dollars to avoid having the lights or stove shut off.

While the Russells aren't necessarily in that group — their house is valued at \$1 million according to Maryland tax records — they were still concerned enough to take part in a "home energy audit," performed by Efficient Home, a Burtonsville business that assesses what homeowners can do to make their homes more energy-efficient. The audit is a home-wide inspection, highlighting trouble spots where heat could escape, decreasing the efficiency of one's home.

With gas bills climbing over \$200 in the winter months, the Russells said enough



BRIAN LEWIS/THE GAZETTE

Tony Crane (left) of Efficient Homes uses an infrared camera to show Bethesda resident Shannon Russell where heat is escaping from her home. With energy prices climbing and many budgets tightening, many households are trying to find new ways to offset the costs.

is enough. Efficient Homes surveyed their house, running pressure fans and infrared cameras to search for leaking heat, and checking doorways and windows to make sure they're tight.

While still awaiting the final results from the Thursday audit, Shannon Russell said the family is going to insulate the attic better, and add flashing around some of the older door frames.

"This is probably cheaper than a marriage counselor, so I think we'll go for it," she said after the inspection.

For some Montgomery County families, however, the work done on a home can mean the difference between living comfortably and losing a house.

Eddie Pennyman, one of the Efficient Homes contractors who performed the Russell's home audit, said some houses have so little insulation that residents lose 30 to 40 percent of their heat through the walls.

"It could cost them \$1,500 to insulate their home better, and the payback on that investment is in two to three years," he said. "But some don't want to do it, or don't even know it could help."

Susan Kirk, executive director of Bethesda Cares, a nonprofit aimed at helping homeless and low-income residents, said the slumping economy has brought more people to her group seeking utility assistance.

"We've seen a huge upswing in the past year, more than I can remember in the past," she said.

From April to August this year, Bethesda Cares offered utility assistance to 112 households, totaling \$9,834. During the same time period last year, the group assisted 73 households, costing \$5,659.

Most of the funds in the summer go to electric bills, which soar due to air conditioning costs, according to the group's records. Pennyman said poorly-insulated houses are just as likely to let heat in during the summer as they are to lose heat in the winter.

"We usually see a spike in requests during the winter months, because of heating costs, but this year they kept coming throughout the summer, too," Kirk said.

Countywide numbers are up as well, according to Kelly Oland, a lead case worker for the county's energy and rental assistance program, through the Department of Health and Human Services.

Since July 1, more than 6,000 Montgomery households have received utility assistance, up from 5,500 last year from July through October. The program is a state and federally-funded program and has doled out more than \$628,000 since the beginning of July, Oland said. Average assistance ranges from \$50 to \$1,500, per household she said.

"Energy assistance statewide has gone up," she said. "We have just seen an increase in need from some sectors we haven't had in the past."

To qualify for state assistance, salary requirements begin at \$18,000 per year and climb \$6,000 per additional member of the household.

"We do think it's a very important problem to try and fix from an environmental standpoint," said Bruce Russell about his family's energy usage and leakage, "but it would be nice to save some money, too."

TO GET HELP

If you need help paying for utilities, contact the Office of Home Energy Programs at 240-777-4450, or visit www.montgomerycountymd.gov/hhs. You can download the OHEP application at the Web site and mail it to 1301 Piccard Drive, 4th Floor, Rockville, MD, 20850. Walk-ins are welcome.

ENERGY SAVING TIPS

- Many in the county are feeling the pinch of rising energy costs and the slumping economy. To help lower your own energy costs, try:
- Setting your thermostat between 65 and 70 degrees during the day and at 58-60 degrees at night or when away from home for more than a few hours
- Insulating your attic, outer walls, and basement
- Closing doors and windows to rooms in the house that aren't used often
- Using compact fluorescent light bulbs, which use up to 80 percent less electricity than regular bulbs
- Closing the fireplace damper when not in use

SOURCE: MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES