



Heat or Eat:

**Helping each other gain control
over rising utility bills**



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Media

- Provide more coverage on utilities issues, particularly as they affect low income people.
- Publish information on programs that provide energy assistance, and efficiency and conservation education.
- Have series on energy efficiency techniques that the average person can do in their home.

Personal Stories...

36 year old Keesha Smith has had it rough attempting to make things work here in New Orleans. Trying to raise her 6 year old daughter on a fixed income when the father isn't around or helping, she struggles to find a way to survive. She has 7 children altogether but only cares for one of them. She had her first when she was 15. The others have been staying with her mother ever since the disasters of Katrina, her oldest being 19. Keesha is on SSI receiving only \$674 a month. Her one bedroom apartment once rented for \$435 but just recently went up on rent. She now pays \$600 leaving her with \$74 to spend on utilities and needs for her daughter. The home is old and in poor condition. She is in a dangerous community that is counterproductive for raising a child. On any given day she may have someone selling drugs from her front stoop. She does her best to cope with the environment. When it comes to food, she tries not to worry too much because she receives \$182 in food stamps. But stretching that money for the month comes hard for a growing little girl.

Facing the daily struggles of wondering how the lights will stay on and how she can keep her cell phone on, she also has to deal with the battle of fighting HIV/AIDs. She found out she had it about 7 years ago; and luckily none of her children are infected. Keesha says, health wise, she tries to stay as energized as possible and as healthy as possible because she has a daughter to care for. But other than that she rarely thinks about it. Her main worries lie in making sure her lights, phones, and heat can stay on. She hates the fact that she can't give her daughter

Churches, Non Profits, Neighborhood Organizations

- Provide community education for your members, constituents, neighbors about understanding their bills, energy conservation and energy efficiency
- Encourage members, constituents, neighbors to get training in energy efficiency so that they can help themselves and others use less electricity and gas.
- Organize your members, constituents, neighbors so that they can support organizations like Alliance for Affordable Energy in pushing for better energy policies.



Showing people how to read their meter during an energy workshop.

City Council

- Continue to push Entergy to invest more of its resources in weatherization and energy efficiency programs for rate payers
- Require Entergy to report monthly or bi monthly the number of residential disconnections resulting from nonpayment of bills. Make this data available to the public.
- Continue to challenge Entergy to work their budget to cut utility rates. Electric rates in New Orleans remain higher than the four areas reserved by Entergy Gulf States.
- Have Entergy sponsor regular town hall meetings to answer questions and hear the voices of the communities they service.

An energy efficient home in the 9th ward of New Orleans.



everything that she wants. “I’m tired of looking at my daughter and looking at a wish list; momma this is what I want my room to look like, this is what I want my house to look like,” she says of her daughter.

Mentally and emotionally it stresses her out. She finds herself depressed because she can’t provide like she would want to. She tends to be nervous and paranoid; always on edge cause any day they could be turning off the lights. Keesha doesn’t know how she is going to pay her energy bill this month. On top of that her cell phone will be cut off in the next couple of weeks because she wasn’t able to pay that bill. “It’s really disgusting sometimes” she says, “bills going up, rent going up but wages are staying the same. Cost of living is going up but the wages aren’t going up enough for it. It’s not right.” In the next couple of months she see’s no lights, no phone. She sees a struggle. But with a strong spirit, Keesha continues to do her best to make a way. Willing to do anything in her power so that she doesn’t have to go through any tougher hardships she continues to have faith. She says, “98 percent of its like a no win situation, but they say prayer changes things so I do just that, keep praying.”

Low income home in New Orleans community.



Lionel Baskins is not a stranger to hard work. In his younger years, with an absent mother in his children's lives, Lionel was left to raise his sons, working three jobs to support them. Now at 55 years of age, Lionel is still a giving man. His loving heart and passion for helping people makes him a special person to the community. He is very active in the community, currently working as the official vocal musical instructor of the New Orleans Recreational Department. Well known in the community for his musical talent, he opens up his home to his nephews and kids in the neighborhood, teaching them how to play different instruments and letting them record music on his computer. He also finds time to volunteer with autistic children at a local community center.

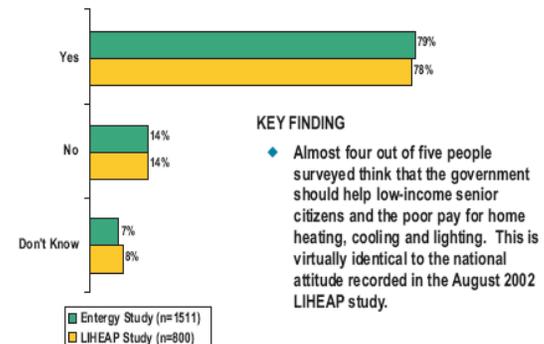
His charity and willingness to give doesn't compensate for his lack of income and struggle to make ends meet. He lives in a two bedroom house with his 23 year old grandchild who suffers from scoliosis. He is on a fixed income through SSI, receiving \$700 a month. His rent is fairly low at \$100 a month but his energy bill runs him between \$300 to \$350 monthly, taking about half of his income. He only receives \$19 in food stamps for each month which is a step up from the ten dollars he was receiving in the past years. With his food stamps he usually buys bread, grits and milk so that he knows that he can at least have a meal that lasts. In order to get around, the bus picks him up, so transportation runs him about \$112 a month. With these expenses, along with others, Lionel just has enough income to make ends meet. "Money is tight, the economy is so tight" Lionel explains.

In 1995 one of Lionel's sons passed away. Soon after, Lionel formed very bad hypertension which caused complications in his eyes. He soon became blind. Although blind he continued working as a music instructor in the school system until that was suddenly ended due to the disaster of hurricane Katrina. After the storm he came back and like many, attempted to restart his life. In order to keep his health, Lionel takes 15 pills per day. He suffers from kidney failure and must go through dialysis two times a week. He also takes daily in-

Congressional Leaders

- Look and work for funds to assist low income landlords to make their rental units energy efficient.
- Provide emergency utilities assistant funds in the case of natural disasters such as Katrina and Gustav.
- Maintain LIHEAP funding at high rates and look for more funding that can be allocated to more local organizations for utilities assistance.

Should The Government Help People Pay?



Q9. Should the government help low-income senior citizens and the poor pay for home heating, cooling and lighting? (Included in the LIHEAP August 2002 national survey)



Recommendations

sulin shots for his diabetes.

In times of crisis, when money has to be spent on emergency needs it is impossible to account for basic necessities. Such was the case in mid September when Hurricane Gustav made an unfriendly visit to New Orleans. Lionel was forced to evacuate under horrible traveling and living conditions. He was told that they would be traveling to Arkansas but ending up in an old church in Tennessee sleeping on the cold floor and spending the little money that he had on appropriate foods for diabetes and medicine for his sick children. A week later he returned to New Orleans without any money for bills or rent. His family and friends struggle to help Lionel being his source of help when times get rough. He states, “If I didn’t have my family and friends it would be much harder.” The high energy bills and the struggle to pay them become a burden for Lionel, leaving him disgusted and angry at times. Lionel tries to adjust to the high cost of living but it leaves him with very little to meet basic needs.

Although times are tough he tries to make do with what he has. “When I don’t have, I just don’t have; might not be able to eat a steak everyday, but I make do with what I have.” He continues to volunteer his time to other people, even when he isn’t sure how some of his bills will be paid. Lionel is a servant in his community and works as hard as he can, but still finds himself in the midst of a struggle to maintain daily needs. As many people have, he has accepted his situation as his struggle to live and is doing his all to make the best of it.

Sylvania Moore is a 39 year old woman born and raised in the great city of New Orleans. She is a single mother of a growing 11 year old daughter and a 19 year old son who has dreams of going to college. As with many people, Hurricane Katrina put a damper on her financial situation where her income went down and expenses increased. Before Katrina, Sylvania never was late paying bills or rent but now, due to the devastating storm, she sometimes has to hold off on current bills until the next pay period. When she came back from Katrina she was homeless. She was fortunate enough to get in the Hope House transitional program, where they provided housing for people with children for periods up to 9 months. She was able to work, save up money and get her own place. Getting into a home was a great battle to overcome but she soon encountered her new battle of keeping up with the high cost of living when the income doesn't always match.

Sylvia says her biggest struggles are her rent and high light bills. "When you have money to do one thing, then the other thing becomes more important so it's a struggle," she says. She works as a cook at a local restaurant here in New Orleans. Sylvia finds herself constantly fighting for hours, trying to get at least 40 a week, but a lot of the time those hours get cut. She says that she has to "tough it out" and wait until time presents itself so that she can make her 40 hours again. Her checks come out to \$700 bi weekly but sometimes only \$400. Her energy bill used to run her around \$200 a month, but with the help of Hope House and some helpful hints, her bill has gone down to around \$92 a month. Her rent is \$657 a month which is sometimes hard for her to pay. But it is her first priority because she has to make sure that there is somewhere for her and children to lay their heads. When utilities come around she has to make a conscious effort to see what money she has and pay them accordingly. If she doesn't have the money she has to wait until her next check, forcing her to pay the bill late and pay the late fees that accumulate. When times get like that, as they often do, she tries to reach out to organizations like Hope House who help assist people who are

weatherize their homes and buy energy efficient appliances. They may know that these actions would save them money in the long term, but they don't have the resources to invest in many energy saving techniques.

Environmental Concerns

High utility bills are not the only reasons for taking control of our use of energy. Scientists are gravely concerned that the high and inefficient use of energy has very negative effects on nature and the planet. The massive production of carbon dioxide, a product of increased use of oil, gas, and coal in the production of electricity and gasoline, is causing our planet to heat up.

This heating up of our atmosphere causes us to use even more energy and money to keep cool. But it also affects the weather, leading to more and more powerful storms; growing seasons and crop production; sea levels and coastal land loss; sea life and the availability and price of fish, shrimp, oysters, etc.

By using energy more efficiently and by not using energy pointlessly, we can not only cut our utility bills, but we can improve our own health and the health of our planet.

Many elderly and disabled people on very modest, often fixed incomes simply can't take effective action to lower their utility bills. They don't have the resources to hire someone to do things for them, and they are physically unable to do it themselves. Family and neighbors sometimes help people in this situation, but many seniors and disabled people don't have people who can offer this kind of assistance.

Many children, as well as adults, suffer from respiratory diseases like asthma. They often cannot deal with high, humid conditions in their homes. To avoid asthmatic attacks, they need cooler, less humid conditions during the warmer months. Many, however, cannot afford to do so. Too frequently, they show up at doctor's offices and emergency rooms

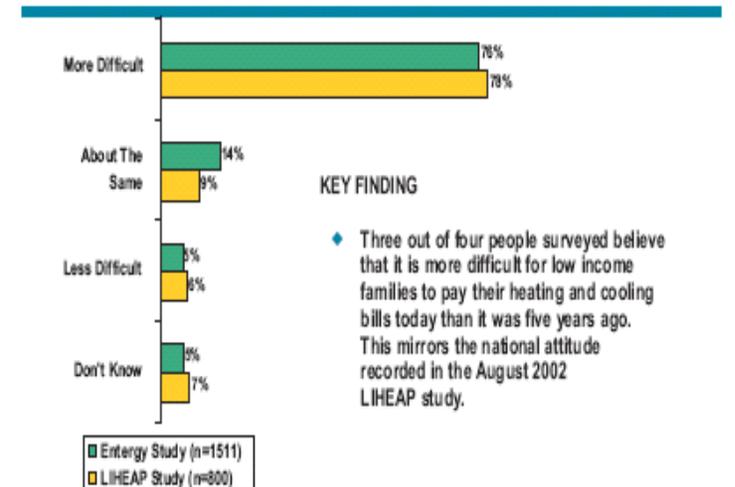
Many very low-income households rent from landlords. They seek housing they can afford, and the housing that they can afford is often old, poorly maintained, lacking insulation and weatherization - basically energy inefficient. Landlords often see no economic incentive for making their low-income rental units energy efficient, since tenants really cannot afford to pay a higher rent. Renters in this situation have neither the money nor the legal right to make significant energy efficiency upgrades in their homes. So, while they may have rents that they can manage to pay, their utility bills are often significantly higher than they can afford.

Very low income homeowners are in a similar situation. They do not have the financial resources to

having problems paying their utilities; if not she just tries to make it work.

The overall struggle to make ends meet and keep up with bills is extremely stressful for her. She finds herself worrying all the time about lights, rent and food. Like many others, she battles with the fact that there isn't any time available to just be free, have fun and relax. She lives her life to pay her bills and make sure there is a home to come to with lights and heat that works. "There is no leisure," Sylvania explains, "You just work to pay bills and if you have any little money after, then you may try to treat yourself every now and then but you're scared to do that cause you never know what will or can happen." The struggle continues for her and for people like her here in New Orleans and all over the country.

More Or Less Difficult To Pay Utility Bills Today?



Q1. From what you read or hear, do you think it is more difficult, about the same, or less difficult for low income families to pay their heating and cooling bills today than it was five years ago? (Included in the LIHEAP August 2002 national survey)



Commentary

Tens of Thousands of People at Risk

The three individuals profiled at the beginning of this report are real people, fellow citizens of New Orleans, neighbors. Their stories touch our hearts. We want to do something to make life a bit easier for each of them – and for their children.

But these individuals are also representatives of much larger groups of people, many of whom are experiencing similar limitations on their ability to live well. There are thousands of Sylvania Moore's struggling alone to raise children. They are very low income, single parent mothers. Thousands of other people are like Ms. Scott and Mr. Baskin; they are disabled or elderly, surviving on the very limited incomes provided by social security or disability checks. They are not just a small number of people. An estimated 23% of New Orleanians live in poverty. That means over 70,000 of us!

If we want to do something to make life a bit easier for Sylvania, Keisha, and Lionel, then we must also want to do something for the many thousands of people living in situations like theirs. As the present recession deepens and affects more and more residents of New Orleans, we all need to look at ways to help our fellow citizens and neighbors, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Focus on Utilities

The reason we focus on utilities in this paper is because people, working individually or in concert, can take effective action to lower their utility bills. A great deal of electricity and natural gas is wasted in New Orleans. Energy conservation and energy efficiency can lower bills significantly, saving limited income for other areas of need.

An individual household can do a lot to lower its utility bill. Setting thermostats a little higher during warm times and a little lower during cold periods can make a significant difference. Turning off air conditioners and heaters when no body is home clearly saves energy and dollars. Simple weatherization techniques like covering spaces around exterior doors and windows, filling spaces between walls and floors, , and closing doors to room that are not being used. Using fluorescent light bulbs and insulating the water heater can also make a significant difference.

Many people do not make the connection between how they use their utilities and their bills. They simply blame Entergy for charging exorbitant prices. When they come to understand that there are things that they can do to lower their bills and begin to take conscious control of their utility use, their bills often shrink. Energy efficiency workshops provide this awareness and offer simple, no-cost and low cost ways to cut energy use, but access to such workshops remains very limited.