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Even cheaper energy unaffordable for many, report finds

By Luther Turmelle, New Haven Register

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Even with the price of oil and natural gas declining over the past year, the number of Connecticut households that can't afford their energy bills continues to grow, according to a new report released Wednesday by Operation Fuel, a private, nonprofit program that provides emergency energy assistance around the state.

More than 313,000 Connecticut households can't afford their energy bills, according to the Home Energy Affordability Gap: Connecticut report. That's an increase of 8,000 households from last year, according to Patricia Wrice, Operation Fuel's executive director.

At the same time, Wrice said the energy affordability gap decreased by \$313 million to \$471 million for households with incomes at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. The number is the gap between what it costs to heat the households of Connecticut's less fortunate and how much they can pay toward that amount.

The reason that the affordability gap shrunk is because of reduction in fuel prices, particularly home heating oil, she said.

"People finally are getting a break in energy prices but the problem hasn't gone away," Wrice said.

The 313,000 households cited in the report this year owe about \$1,506 more on average in annual energy bills than they can afford to pay, she said.

"Having a gap of \$1,500 is a heavy burden for these people," Wrice said.

Operation Fuel has a \$500 cap on the money its makes available for households in need of help, she said. The primary source of energy assistance for low income households in Connecticut is the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

The LIHEAP program has \$89 million at its disposal this winter, Wrice said, which is about the same level that it was funded at last winter. Connecticut's LIHEAP allocation was enough to pay only 14 percent of the latest energy affordability gap, she said.

The report was prepared by economist Roger Colton, a partner with Fisher, Sheehan & Colton Public Finance and General Economics, of Belmont, Massachusetts.

"The fact that the Home Energy Affordability Gap in Connecticut can decrease by more than \$300 million, and still leave an aggregate cap substantially higher than available assistance resources, indicates the extent of the affordability gap crisis in Connecticut," Colton said in a statement.

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