

Help for weathering electric costs increases

BY LOIS BELL
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COURTESY PHOTO

Sheridan Senior Center volunteer Pam Stevenson assists families with applications for low income energy assistance. The Senior Center provides this service for homeowners of all ages including senior residents.

SHERIDAN — Effective in March, customers will see increases from Montana-Dakota Utilities for their electricity usage. MDU provides electrical and gas services to approximately 16,000 residents in Sheridan County. After negotiations with the Sheridan City Council last year, the utility provider went before the Wyoming Public Service Commission earlier this month to request a rate increase. The request included recovery of \$22 million in investments in the Sheridan area that included a new substation and additional transmission lines.

“For a consumer, the numbers translate to an approximate \$7.50 per month to the residential customer, slightly less than 10% on average,” said Bryce Freeman, administrator at the Office of Consumer Affairs in Cheyenne. The OCA advocates on the behalf of consumers on issues related to utility rate increases (see Center Stage column on this page).

But some senior residents on fixed incomes — some receiving less than \$400 per month — will be hit the hardest by the increase. Seniors received a \$2 to \$3 per month raise in social security payments that was taken by increases in Medicare costs for those under that insurance coverage.

Hopefully warmer weather can come with March and give households time to adjust. And there are resources and strategies to help offset the increase for low income households.

One resource is the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program. LIEAP provides assistance for the primary heating source for qualifying households. Gwen Burgess, Outreach Coordinator at the Sheridan

Senior Center, is a contact for the community and helps with the LIEAP application for those who don't want to download the forms and apply directly. Burgess is assisted by volunteer Pam Stevenson.

The downside is the deadline for LIEAP applications for the current year is February 28, 2017, so time is short. The LIEAP staff are currently working through 7,000 applications throughout Wyoming.

“It can take four weeks before they can process your application,” Burgess said. LIEAP will inform you if you have been accepted or denied by letter.

The key to moving the process along is

to provide complete documentation and to follow up by calling the LIEAP office to be sure they have everything they need. LIEAP will not call applicants if documentation is missing. Being declined may only be due to missing documentation and can be rectified by providing what is missing. A phone call to LIEAP could help in this case.

Should you be approved for LIEAP assistance, payments are mailed directly to MDU. LIEAP assistance is from the month of approval through May, and you must manually apply each year for the following year.

If you heat with electricity, you will defi-

nately see the increase in your MDU bill. “But if you don't and your overall heating bill increases, you can still apply to LIEAP,” said Burgess.

A second resource is the City of Sheridan's Utility Assistance Program (UAP) for residents age 65 and older who own their home. This program provides a 50-percent reduction in water, sewer, and trash costs. The reduction can help free up money to pay utility costs. But you must qualify for LIEAP to apply for UAP assistance, according to Dan Roberts, City of Sheridan Utilities Division Manager. The UAP application can be filled out at the customer service desk at City Hall, but you must bring your current LIEAP awards letter with you.

Energy Share of Wyoming is a third resource for heating payment assistance. For Sheridan County residents, the Salvation Army manages this program. Applications for assistance are accepted beginning around November but vary from year-to-year based on demand for assistance and funding levels.

Another strategy is to go on balanced billing with MDU.

“You can contact MDU about a balanced billing plan where you pay the same amount every month,” said Nancy Drummond, Community Service Coordinator. “This way you know every month what to expect to pay.”

Be energy conscience in your home. Forty-two percent of utilities are used in space heating with water heating following in second place. Adequate insulation, replacing worn out appliances with energy efficient appliances and turning down the temperature on your water heater help.

“And turn off the lights when you leave a room,” said Drummond.

CENTER STAGE

Representing the utility consumer

The Wyoming Office of Consumer Advocate, formed in 2003 and known as the OCA, is an independent office that is responsible under state law for representing consumer interests in matters involving public utilities in Wyoming. Most often, the OCA represents consumers in utility cases heard by the Wyoming Public Service Commission. Currently, the

OCA is staffed by six professionals with decades of experience advocating for the best interests of utility customers: an Administrator and Deputy Administrator who both function as working rate analysts, two rate analysts and two attorneys. The OCA, like the PSC, is funded through an assessment on utility

consumers when they pay their monthly bills. On average, the OCA's annual budget costs the average utility ratepayer in Wyoming about a nickel a month.

Generally, utility companies must seek and be granted approval from the PSC before they can make any changes in the rates, terms or conditions of service. For example, before a utility can implement a rate increase, it must

first file an application requesting PSC approval to do so. Under state law, the OCA has the right to participate in any utility proceeding before the PSC to advocate for the best interests of customers and of the public in general. When the OCA participates or “intervenes” in a proceeding before the PSC, it is its duty to ensure that the rate increase being requested by the utility is justified; that it is no more than necessary to enable the utility to continue providing safe, adequate and reliable service.

In order to ensure that a rate increase is necessary, the OCA conducts a detailed review of the utility's expenses and investments, including items like workers' salaries, maintenance expenses, investments the utility has made in things like substations, poles and wires and the level of return or profitability being requested by the utility. After reviewing all of this information, it makes recommendations to the PSC regarding any expenses or investments that it believes should be reduced or not included in customer rates. It does this in a hearing, not unlike a court proceeding, before the PSC, where the PSC takes evidence provided by the utility in support of its request, as well the OCA and others who recommend adjustments to that request. After hearing

the evidence, the PSC then determines the rates the utility can charge going forward.

Recently, the OCA and the City of Sheridan intervened in the rate case filed by Montana Dakota Utilities (MDU) related to its electric service in the Sheridan area, its first since 2009. In this case, MDU originally requested an overall revenue increase in the amount of \$3,225,447 per annum, or approximately 13.15 percent. After analyzing the application, the OCA recommended an increase of \$2,379,112. Subsequently, the parties agreed to a negotiated rate increase of \$2,712,245 per year, or approximately 11.05 percent, which was approved by the PSC. Negotiated agreements among parties to a utility rate cases are common and allowed by statute as they are thought to reduce the time and expense of regulatory proceedings. However, the ultimate authority to set rates rests with the PSC, and it can reject an agreement if it is found to be contrary to the public interest. Residential customers will see about a 10.20-percent increase, or about 16 percent less than MDU originally requested.

BRUCE FREEMAN is an administrator for the Wyoming Office of Consumer Affairs in Cheyenne. Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan Community. It is a collection of



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Resources for utility assistance

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SHERIDAN — If you find you need assistance to help pay for utility costs, there are a number of places in Sheridan to contact for information or to apply.

Wyoming Low Income Energy Assistance

Program

Heating assistance. Sheridan Senior Center, 211 Smith Street. Call 672-2240 for an appointment. Proof of income, identification, and your current utility bill are required.

For information on the status of your application, the LIEAP toll-free number

is 1-800-246-4221.

Sheridan Utility Assistance Program

Sewer, water, and trash services payment assistance.

Sheridan City Hall, 55 Grinnell Plaza. 674.6483.

Applicants must be approved for LIEAP, own their own residence, and be

65 years or older.

Energy Share of Wyoming

Heating assistance. Salvation Army of Sheridan, 150 South Tschirgi Street. 672-2444. Hours are Mondays through Fridays (excluding holidays), 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Testing wearable sensors as 'check engine' light for health

WASHINGTON (AP) — A next step for smart watches and fitness trackers? Wearable gadgets gave a Stanford University professor an early warning that he was getting sick before he ever felt any symptoms of Lyme disease.

Geneticist Michael Snyder never had Lyme's charac-

teristic bulls-eye rash. But a smart watch and other sensors charted changes in Snyder's heart rate and oxygen levels during a family vacation. Eventually a fever struck that led to his diagnosis.

Say “wearables,” and step-counting fitness trackers spring to mind. It's not

clear if they really make a difference in users' health. Now Snyder's team at Stanford is starting to find out, tracking the everyday lives of several dozen volunteers wearing devices that monitor more than mere activity.

He envisions one day having wearables that act as a

sort of “check engine” light indicating it's time to see the doctor.

“One way to look at this is, these are the equivalent of oral thermometers but you're measuring yourself all the time,” said Snyder, senior author of a report released Thursday on the project.