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Help available to avoid high heating bills

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By Donna Hilton

Cooler weather is here, and that may worry some local residents who are concerned about heating costs. There are several sources of information and help, both to reduce costs and help those who need it.

Most utility companies have programs in place to help low-income customers, said a spokesman for the Arkansas Attorney General's office. In many cases, the utility companies can offer payment plans or special credits to assist customers with spiking utility bills.

Federal assistance may be available to some through Arkansas Community Action Agencies. In Clark County, the Central Arkansas Development Council often has programs to assist residents with increased energy costs.

The CADC has offices in Arkadelphia, Bismarck and Gurdon. Information can also be obtained at the CADC Head Start programs in Glenwood and Amity.

Several steps can be taken now to lower heating bills in the future, said Arkadelphia Fire Chief Ricky Arnold. Residents should check for cracks in electrical cords and leaks in gas lines and have any problems repaired or faulty items replaced immediately.

Arnold also urges residents who use space heaters to make sure they are placed away from flammable items, such as furniture, curtains, carpets, etc.

He reminds residents that fall is also the time to change batteries in smoke, fire and carbon monoxide detectors.

Many utility companies offer an "energy audit" of a house's heating system to gauge its efficiency. An online audit can be done through the U.S. Department of Energy's Web site at <http://hes.lbl.gov/>.

There are also several things a homeowner can do to lower utility costs without spending a large amount of money upfront. They include:

- wrap the hot water heater with an insulating jacket;
- seal and insulate leaky ducts to ensure the efficiency of the heating equipment;
- set the thermostat to a lower temperature at night;

- check caulking and weather-stripping around doors and windows. Replace or repair when necessary;
- close foundation vents if there's a crawl space under the house;
- close doors to rooms that aren't used;
- prune shrubs that may block airflow to your heat pump;
- install ceiling fans to circulate air.

"All of these are low-cost ways to help save money this winter," the spokesman for the attorney general's office said.

The Consumer Protection Division of the Attorney General's office also reminds residents that advertisements for "home improvements" often increase as winter approaches.

"Be wary of devices, gadgets and energy-saving products that promise drastic reductions in home-heating costs," the spokesman said.

Make sure a contractor is licensed and reputable; ask for references and check them. Information on legitimate businesses can be found with the Better Business Bureau or the attorney general's office.

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