

Fuel bills claim 25% of seniors' income

The recently proposed price increases in home heating fuel would pose "an immediate and significant hardship" on a large number of elderly state residents, a University of Michigan study indicates.

"Nearly one out of five elderly persons surveyed already report they are sacrificing food, medical care or other necessities in order to pay home heating bills," according to Richard L. Douglass of the Institute of Gerontology at the U-M.

"Currently, the poorest residents interviewed are paying over 25 percent of their income on fuel bills. If the proposed price hike goes through, many will be paying up to half their income to heat their homes."

The findings are part of a 1988 Needs Assessment Survey conducted for the Region VII Area Agency on Aging, Bay City, Mich. Douglass, a research scientist at the Institute, was commissioned to analyze the collected data. Patricia DeBlasi of the Institute and Margaret Stewart and Alice Whiting, graduate students in the U-M School of Social Work, co-authored the final report.

"Personal interviews were conducted with a sample of 2,082 elderly residents of 11 Bay City area counties in summer 1988. Half were between 60 and 70 years of age and half were over 70. A quarter of the total sample and two-thirds of those over 70 lived alone. The majority resided in small towns or non farm rural areas," Douglass reports.

"Like most elderly populations, they are not affluent. Forty two percent of the sample had an income of less than \$6,000 in 1979 and 23 percent had incomes under \$4,300. Only 6 percent had incomes exceeding \$20,000. In general, the elderly were also the poorest."

While the majority of those interviewed reported satisfactory nutritional status, nearly 3 percent said they did not have at least one hot meal every day.

"Since the sample represents a to-

tal population of some 90,000 elderly, based on the 1970 census, this indicates an estimated 2,300 elderly in Region VII do not receive adequate meals," Douglass says.

"The survey respondents also reported higher levels of chronic illnesses than would be expected from national data, including arthritis (61 percent), hypertension (45 percent), and heart condition (29 percent). Insufficient home heat could impose further health problems," he notes.

The majority of respondents receive an annual physical examination and two-thirds indicate no problems in obtaining medical care. Among the rest, the most frequently mentioned obstacles are lack of money and lack of transportation.

Eighty-five percent of those surveyed live in single family homes. Most of the homes were in satisfactory physical condition with the exception of those belonging to the oldest and poorest respondents.

"Nearly two-thirds of the respondents use natural or bottled gas for home heating and the majority are responsible for paying their own fuel bills. The oldest and poorest and those who live on farms are the most likely to depend on heating oil, and thus have been the most immediately affected by the recent rapid increases in fuel prices," Douglass says.

"Only one-third of the sample report taking advantage of the Fuel Rebate Homestead Tax Credit — about half the number who are eligible for this benefit. Thus, the principal and most important recommendation that emerges from this survey is the need to strengthen the visibility and availability of existing programs and services."

"In a time of scarce resources, it is appropriate to direct services to the elderly who are most vulnerable to effects of poverty, illness and isolation," Douglass continues.

'Walk In-Walk Out Week' County lets scofflaws come clean

By Mike Scanlon
staff writer

They're not desperate criminals, you understand, but out there somewhere are 4,636 mainly divorced people with a tendency to cover like whipped dogs whenever a patrol car passes them.

Their problem is that they've kept Oakland County waiting too long for nearly \$30 million in court-ordered, overdue alimony and child-support payments.

Oakland County has government's version of a collection agency waiting for these people — 4,636 arrest warrants.

LET BYGONES be bygones, the county Friend of the Court has decided, however.

At least from July 27 through July 31.

The "Walk In-Walk Out Week," as it's being billed, allows people with outstanding bench warrants resulting from failure to pay awards in divorces, separations, paternity suits or family-support actions to drop by the Friend of the Court without fear of arrest.

If payback arrangements are reached which the Friend of the Court decides are satisfactory, the warrant will be quashed. If no such arrangement can be reached between the county and the delinquent payers, as they're called, they'll be free to go.

These are suspicious times, however, and Kim S. Bateman knows it. Bateman, chief assistant for operations of Friend of the Court, acknowledges that some people will be hard-pressed to believe they will be allowed to walk away scot-free if they can't or won't pay.

"We have to see this guy tomorrow

and next week and next year and sometimes 10 and 15 years later," Bateman said. "We know he's got a long memory."

Bateman also said that a considerable number of those with pending warrants probably don't deserve to be under that threat.

"We're getting a lot of people who are borrowed out, flat out, and they're laying low," Bateman said. "We do this (arrest-free consultations) anyway, but we're doing (the week) now because we know there's a lot of people out there frightened" about the potential for arrest if they seek county help.

In fact, however, long-term unemployment or other reductions in income are grounds to ask county courts for reductions in monthly payments, Bateman said.

"We have to prod a lot of people into

action. So we anticipate we'll have a lot of people and say 'Look, you've got rights. Go out and do something about it.'"

Bateman said there's no way to know how many of the 4,636 still live in the Oakland County area.

THE 4,636 aren't alone, by the way. Bateman said Friend of the Court handled 6,000 child-related divorce cases last year.

"We've hit a plateau in the filing of divorces—a year in the last three years. It's not increasing geometrically anymore," Bateman said.

Some 4,097 bench warrants for overdue Friend of the Court payments were issued last year, Bateman said. At least that many and perhaps as many 6,000 more warrants are expected this year, he said.

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