

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## METRO&STATE

### Need overwhelms aid for AEP bills

By Rita Price

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A donor-supported hardship fund for Ohio customers of American Electric Power is almost too popular: So many households seek help that the program occasionally runs short of money.

As the Neighbor to Neighbor program enters its second year, officials say they're looking to pace the grants and to attract more contributions from businesses and other customers.

"We learned from the trends last year," said Chad Quinn of Dollar Energy Fund, the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization that manages the program for AEP. "When the economy was at its worst, we were spending about \$500,000 a month. We can't maintain that pace."

**In its first year, the donor-supported fund gave \$2.3 million to lower-income customers.**

Most of the \$2.3 million given to moderate- and low-income families who are behind on their bills has come from AEP. Customers, who can donate by checking a box on their monthly electricity bill or by visiting Dollar Energy online, are sending about \$5,000 a month, Quinn said.

Officials hope to add an "opt-in" feature so that customers can check the box just once instead of monthly.

"We're working with AEP to develop a plan to reach the online bill payers, too," Quinn said.

About 4,500 of the 9,185 households that received assistance in the past year

are in Franklin County. They accounted for nearly half the money, or about \$1.1 million, officials said.

The program aims to help Ohioans in a 49-county service area who are struggling but might have incomes that are too high for government assistance. Households with an income at or below 200 percent of the poverty level, or about \$44,100 for a family of four, are eligible.

In central Ohio, the Salvation Army processes the most Neighbor to Neighbor applications.

"It's been huge, on the verge of overwhelming our staff sometimes," said Alice Hohl, a spokeswoman for

the Salvation Army in Greater Columbus.

AEP is committing an additional \$500,000 to the fund today, and will continue to match donations, Quinn said. All money raised stays in Ohio, and there are no administrative fees.

Probably fewer than 1 percent of customers donate through their bills, which isn't unexpected, Quinn said. Similar programs that have been running for years in other parts of the country generally draw 2 percent to 4 percent participation, he said.

"It's a tough sell, and it takes time," he said. "But it's only a buck. People waste more than that every day."

*To receive help, donate or get more information, go to [www.dollarenergyfund.org](http://www.dollarenergyfund.org). [rprice@dispatch.com](mailto:rprice@dispatch.com)*