

The Columbus Dispatch

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AEP hardship fund in demand

About \$750,000 paid out, but customer donations scarce

By Rita Price

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In just three months, more than 3,600 households have tapped into a new hardship fund for Ohio customers of American

Electric Power who are behind on their bills.

That's more than twice the number of households that contributed to the program, which asks customers to check a box and make a donation for others

when they pay their electricity bills.

"It really takes some time to gain momentum," said Erin O'Donnell of Dollar Energy Fund, the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization that administers

the fund for AEP. "We expect that."

The utility company put up \$1 million when the program was announced in May and recently added \$500,000 more, O'Donnell said.

About \$750,000 has been given to struggling custom-

ers so far.

AEP said it has received approximately 1,500 contributions to the fund for a total of about \$10,200. AEP will match every dollar donated to the fund, known as Neighbor to Neighbor.

"We're still hoping to raise an additional \$500,000,"

O'Donnell said.

Of the grants that have been applied to AEP bills since the program started, 1,678 were for Franklin County customers, she said.

Households with an income at or below 200 per-

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cent of the poverty level, or about \$44,100 for a family of four, are eligible. To qualify, customers must have made a sincere effort to make a payment in the past 90 days and have an overdue balance.

In central Ohio, families can apply at a Salvation Army office.

"The demand has been astounding," spokeswoman Alice Hohl said. "We actually could use a few more volunteers just to help with the phones."

The agency also processes applications for HeatShare, a Columbia Gas hardship fund that also asks customers to donate when paying their bills.

That 24-year-old program received about \$128,000 in customer contributions during the past heating season, spokesman Ken Stammen said.

Columbia gave a partial match of about \$74,000 and contributed an additional \$930,000 toward all HeatShare grants, he said.

Growing numbers of families are struggling to pay their utility bills. AEP said yesterday that disconnect notices among Ohio customers were up 6.3 percent last month when compared with July 2007.

Consumer groups don't oppose hardship funds, which are in use nationwide, but they say utility companies could do more for customers by lowering rates.

For more information about the Neighbor to Neighbor fund or to donate online, go to www.dollar-energyfund.org.

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