

Fresno agencies seeing more people in need of energy, food help

By Barbara Anderson



Candelaria Delgado waits in line with her toddler son and baby daughter to get help paying a utility bill. Delgado's mother, Maria Rodriguez, in background, brought her daughter to the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission for assistance. BARBARA ANDERSON — THE FRESNO BEE

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- How to get help

In Fresno County, call 211 to find energy and other assistance programs. Here are three key agencies:

- Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, 1371 Stanislaus St., (559) 263-1135.
- Salvation Army Family Services, 1752 Fulton St., (559) 233-3057.
- Community Food Bank, 3403 E. Central Ave., (559) 237-3663.

3 things to know about slow economic recovery

- About 100 people a day line up at the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission for help paying utility bills.



- People are working again but not at the same income.
- Fresno EOC served 16,243 households with energy assistance before funds ran out in mid-December.

Outside the [Fresno Economics Opportunities Commission](#) in downtown, moms pushing strollers and men in work shirts wait in a line for help to keep the lights on in their homes.

On a typical day, more than 100 people come to apply for one-time energy assistance.

Since January, the beginning of a new funding cycle for the [Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#), EOC field representative Theresa Lopez has watched the line snake outside the building and onto the sidewalk.

This year, more of the people are asking for help for the first time, Lopez said. They've lost a job or their hours have been cut.

"In the last two years, a lot of people with unemployment are coming into our office," she said. "A lot of them get really emotional and a lot of them feel embarrassed."

She reassures them: "This is what we're here for. It's OK to come here for help."

Antaiwn Evans, 42, of Fresno, was laid off in November from his carpet-cleaning job. He's hoping to be called back to work soon, but said, "we'll see if it picks up in the springtime." For now, he needs help, he said Tuesday.

Fresno County's economy, by some estimates, is growing. "Much like the national economy, the San Joaquin Valley economy is expanding at a solid pace," Ernie Goss, a research faculty member with the Craig School of Business at Fresno State, said this week in his monthly report.

Economic growth, however, is not evenly distributed in the Valley, Goss conceded in an interview. Those better educated and trained are finding jobs and their wages are increasing, he said. But for others, jobs remain difficult to land and to keep.

The view is grim for those who provide utility and food assistance.

Families are struggling with hunger, said Kym Dildine, director of development at the [Community Food Bank](#), which now serves Tulare and Kern counties in addition to Fresno, Madera and Kings counties. "The majority of our families have at least one working adult in the home or have worked in the last few months, but there just isn't enough money to make ends meet."

The food bank serves 280,000 people with food assistance every month.

A number of factors contribute to family hardships. In rural communities, seasonal work fluctuations and the drought stand out. Dildine estimates 15,000 people have been directly affected by the drought, which is now in its fourth year.

Families in Fresno and Clovis, the Valley's urban core, haven't escaped, either. "People who are re-entering the work force are not re-entering at the levels when they became unemployed in 2011, 2012," Dildine said. "They're working again, but just not at the same income."

Even the wealthiest neighborhoods in Fresno experience hunger, she said. In northeast Fresno, for example, 20% of the children at Valley Oak Elementary qualify for free and reduced meals, she said.

Paychecks don't stretch far enough, Dildine said.

A lot of the families, faced with lower incomes, cash out their savings to make mortgage payments and save their

homes, but on lower salaries they don't have enough for other bills, she said.

At the [Salvation Army](#), Capt. Deborah Breazeale understands the challenges of families who ask for utility assistance. The charitable organization operates the [REACH](#) (Reach for Energy Assistance with Community Help), a utility assistance program offered through Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

"They have to weigh what bill they're going to pay and they put the PG&E off until it's critical," Breazeale said. Every day, 50 to 85 people call in need of energy assistance, she said.

Outside the Fresno EOC, Marlene Torres, 43, of Fresno, waited to turn in an application to help pay her energy bill. She got laid off as a medical receptionist a few months ago. It's difficult to pay the utilities "when you have rent and everything else," she said.

Torres has looked for work, but without any luck. "There's just a lot of competition out there," she said.

Further back in the EOC line, Candelaria Delgado, 26, of Fresno, said she and her husband struggle on one salary to pay rent, water, trash and other bills for themselves and their two young children. They got behind on the utility bill last summer during the heat wave and EOC helped them then, she said.

Fresno EOC began seeing an increase in the number of people needing energy assistance last summer, said Gilda Arreguin, community services director. The agency served 16,243 households before funds ran out in mid-December.

Arreguin expects to run out of money before this year ends, too.

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