

# Southeast Asian tenants at Fresno apartment complex living without heat

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About 500 people living at a central Fresno apartment complex have gone without heat, hot water or the ability to cook in their kitchens for 10 days, according to a nonprofit aid group.

Zach Darrah, executive director of the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries, said residents of the Somerset Village Apartments, 2103 N. Angus St., have not had gas service. So the heaters have not worked, nor have the stoves or ovens in the units. Tenants are unable to cook and don't have hot water.

Somerset Village is one of the largest refugee apartment complexes in Fresno. Consisting of 150 units, it houses at least 500 residents and possibly many more.

Darrah said his agency just learned of this problem because of the tendency of refugees not to speak out about problems. Mostly Southeast Asian people live at the complex. "They're really cold. They can't take showers," said Darrah.

The ministry program contacted Pacific Gas & Electric Co. PG&E spokesman Denny Boyles said he could not discuss a customer's account without permission. "We are aware of the situation, and we're doing all we can to help. Our first priority always has to be safety. Any situation where we see situations that are unsafe, we are required to work with the property owners to have them corrected."

Darrah said the complex houses young children and seniors – age groups that are particularly vulnerable to cold temperatures.

To help residents cope with the cold, blankets and some heaters were distributed Friday evening.

One challenge aid workers faced: Translators could understand the Lao and Hmong refugees, but some residents are from other Southeast Asian countries. About six languages are spoken by tenants living at the complex.

Among the residents are three women missionaries who notified FIRM of the heating problems.

Jessica de Jager is a missionary from South Africa who lives in the complex and helps the refugee children through a CARE Fresno program.

She said her young students, ages 5 through 12, face tremendous adversity.

"They're too cold to sleep," she said. "They're having trouble focusing. Many are hungry – they are only eating from our vegetable garden. They are too poor to go out and buy take-out."

Many of the students have not showered for days.

De Jager lives with two other missionaries in an apartment that lost its heat. She said part of her job is to assess the needs of the community.

"My roommates are on their way to buy blankets and heaters to help them."

## Trenches dug for gas lines

Fresno City Manager Bruce Rudd said the American Red Cross of Central California was called Friday night to provide blankets and emergency shelter to those who needed it.

Rudd and several code enforcement officials walked through the complex and saw work being performed on various natural gas lines. They found six separate trenches.

Rather than isolate the areas and work on them one at a time, Rudd said, someone attempted to fix them all at once. The city cannot turn the gas back on because officials are unsure of what exactly the problem is.

“Flipping the master valve would be a major safety risk,” Rudd said.

Numerous attempts to reach the property’s manager and its owner were not successful, Rudd said.

Rudd said the residents likely will have to endure the cold until Monday.

City Council Member Clint Olivier alerted Rudd and code enforcement after he learned of the incident.

He used interpreters to explain the situation to the crowd of anxious residents waiting for blankets around 6 p.m.

## **Harsh conditions**

Tenant Cathy Oupathame, 53, said she has been without heat since Nov. 9. She lives by herself and has not been able to cook or bathe with hot water and has had no heat.

Oupathame spoke to the apartment manager the day her heater went out. She said he told her “we are fixing it” and has not said anything else.

“I need heat,” she said. “It’s been very cold. We need help.” The temperature Friday night was to drop into the mid-40s in Fresno.

Oupathame said her 11-year-old daughter, who lives with her 30-year-old daughter at another location, comes by with food.

Sometimes, she added, she doesn’t eat.

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