

Taking the heat

Heat, skyrocketing rates could make seniors in poor health the latest victims of the state's power crisis

By Anne Louise Bannon

Nobody wants to go without air conditioning this summer. But if the power goes out or we need to cut back so that we can pay our electric bills, most of us will live. Not happily, but we'll live.

Senior citizens in fragile health may not. "Seniors, in particular, have been disastrously affected because of a lack of air conditioning when a heat wave strikes," said Pasadena activist Marvin Schachter, who is also a member of the State Commission on Aging.

People with heart and other health problems can die when the temperature climbs and they can't cool down.

While seniors in Pasadena should not be affected by rate hikes, the way seniors in surrounding communities served by Southern California Edison are, potential power outages from rolling blackouts could be problematic, when they shut off much-needed air conditioners or fans, or, worse, life-saving medical equipment, such as respirators.

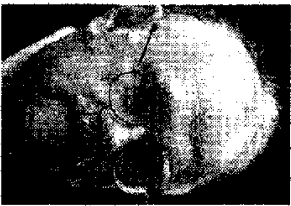
"All hospitals are exempt from rolling blackouts," said Kyle DeVine, spokesperson for the California Public Utilities Commission.

But DeVine and Edison officials all

said that seniors at home, but on life-saving equipment, need to register with their utilities and should also let their local fire departments know so that in the event of a blackout, city officials can be sent to look in on them.

Wilma Allen, head of the Pasadena Health Department, said that the city Fire Department maintains a database of people requiring respirators and other equipment and in the event of a power outage, the city sends firefighters and public health nurses to make sure they are OK.

"We know who they are and where they are," Allen said. "They should make sure they tell So Cal Edison," said Lara Blakely, Edison spokesperson, about Edison customers using respirators and such, adding that the company is working on a program to notify those customers of impending blackouts. "They should also tell their



Marvin Schachter

local fire department."

But for poor seniors living in communities served by Edison, power outages may be the least of their troubles. Paying for the electricity will probably be much, much harder, if pending rate increases go through.

"If the prices are going to increase, then it's going to create more of a problem than it already is," said Edna Johnson, assistant director of the Alhadena Senior Center. Johnson noted that many seniors in the area have all-electric houses, which means that not only are they using air conditioners and lights, but are also cooking their food on electric stoves.

Doug Heller, a consumer advocate with the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights, a group best known because of its vocal leader, Harvey Rosenfield, said that he's also worried that people trying to save money might not put on their air conditioners or fans when they need to.

"We're very concerned that people who can't afford to sweat out the summer heat are at a health risk," he said. "In addition to the potential of blackouts, people might black themselves out to save money."

DeVine said that Gov. Gray Davis' latest proposal would allow seniors

and other poor people to continue taking advantage of a discount program already in place. In addition, their baseline allotment (the set amount of electricity that can be used without costing extra, kind of like monthly minutes on a mobile phone plan) would be increased 200 percent. But the program only allows for a 15 percent discount, and far too many seniors don't even know that they're eligible.

Utilities and others are strongly urging conservation measures, but those will only go so far.

"It will be part of the answer, but you can only conserve so much," Johnson said. "If you have an all-electric house, you could cook two meals at once."

But even then, there are still other meals that need cooking, and, of course, fans and air conditioners.

Schachter said that conservation education is already starting in Pasadena, with a recent meeting put on by city power officials and members of the Foundation for Taxpayers and Consumer Rights. Edison customers can also get a variety of materials to insulate their homes and make them more energy efficient.

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