Utility Bills Burn Through Paychecks for Thousands of Coloradans

By Sarah Tory - March 9, 2021

For the past few years, Susana Martinez Oriliza has dreaded the onset of winter in Colorado.

She lives in a mobile home with her husband and six children in the Dotsero Mobile Home Park, near the eastern edge of Gypsum Creek Golf Course along I-70, a cold, windswept corridor over 6,000 feet high in the mountains. Soon after the family moved into the mobile home, they bought a home from a friend of Martinez’s husband, the furnace broke and they didn’t have the money to replace it. Instead, they rely on space heaters, placed strategically throughout the home.

A few years ago, the water heater stopped working, too. They bought a new one, but the demand for the natural gas that powered it led to a 70% hike in their energy bills. Martinez’s family has learned to keep the thermostat at 63 degrees Fahrenheit. “They were cold all the time,” she said.

Inside the Martinez home, some kids were running around, while others were in the midst of virtual school classes while Martinez was working at closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic—making her husband, a house painter, the sole breadwinner for the family of eight.

“Sometimes, I put pots of water on the stove to help warm up the house,” Martinez told me when I visited one day in February. Throughout the day, they paid $180 every month just for their electricity bill and about $80 for gas. “It’s been really expensive for us,” she said.

At the Dotsero Mobile Home Park, mobile homes run on propane for heat, which costs $3.30 per gallon. But about half of the homes in the park have broken furnaces, leaving families like Martinez’s reliant on electric space heaters and soaking energy bills. A few years ago, the park owner looked into closing it down, but the price for natural gas jumped by $46.30 a month. “We couldn’t afford it,” she said.

In other cases, people who require medical devices that run on electricity were forced to buy them. “There are hundreds of these scenarios,” Cafer told me, “but that one kind of stuck with me.”

In Colorado, a patchwork of federal and state programs (known by an alphabet soup of acronyms like CARE and LEAP and WAP), as well as local nonprofits, fund energy audits, home energy efficiency improvements and utility bill assistance for people struggling with energy insecurity. But due to the various income and citizenship requirements, some people in need fall through the gaps, said Cafer. In places like the San Luis Valley, which has a cold climate and high poverty rates, some federally funded programs like the U.S. Department of Energy’s Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) have three-year waiting lists.

In the Dotsero Mobile Home Park, five entities are funding the weatherization program through the MIRA (Mobile Intercultural Resource Alliance) bus, which brings resources and services to Eagle County’s Spanish-speaking community. “I’ve made a lot of this application form and learned she was eligible for the energy efficiency upgrades, which Cafer estimates will save almost $100 per month on Martinez’s energy bill. O then, the benefit go beyond simply the number of dollars saved; as the 2018 AC EEE report noted, research suggests that alleviating household energy burdens can help reduce respiratory illnesses like asthma triggered by mold, dampness and under-heating, as well as financial stress.

On the day I visited, the crew from NWCCOG was on their third day working on Martinez’s mobile home, which Jones said would take roughly a week to complete. Already, they had repaired the house’s ducts so that the new furnace would deliver heat more efficiently. After the roof insulation was complete, they’d insulate around the base of the house so the food stay warm; then they’d replace light bulbs and shower heads with energy-efficient models, and finally they’d cap the propane and install the electric heating and cooking components.

At the end, Jones told me, Martinez’s home would be effectively “wrapped in a down jacket.”

He pointed to a neighboring mobile home. “Just look at that one, there,” he said, gesturing toward a small metal tube sticking out of the roof. It was filled with, which meant their water heater likely wasn’t working properly, which can lead to poor indoor air quality. More than 50% of the manufactured homes NWCCOG has worked on have a health and safety problem. Improving energy efficiency can mean fewer health issues for things like asthma and carbon monoxide poisoning, the latter of which can cause flu-like symptoms and even be fatal.

Jones recalled how NWCCOG once worked on a house where a family was so crippled by their electric bills that they were keeping the thermostat at 63 degrees Fahrenheit. “They were cold all the time,” he said. In one case, they were paying $146.30 a month in utilities,” Jones said. “Now, with their home at livable temperature, their daughter is healthier and misses less school. ‘We kind of unlocked her potential for the future,’ he said.

Inside the Martinez home, some kids were running around, while others were in the midst of virtual school classes while Martinez supervised them. Five years ago, the mobile home park was supposed to be their way out—an escape from the rising rents in Gypsum Springs and the other mountain towns in Colorado where Martinez’s husband paints homes, but where his own family could no longer afford to live. Instead, much of the money they saved went to pay their energy bills. Martinez said they would pile on sweaters to hang out in the living room and the kids were always getting sick.

A few days after the NWCCOG team had finished the first round of improvements, I called Martinez. The night before, the temperature had dropped to 10 degrees Fahrenheit, but the house felt warm and comfortable. “I couldn’t believe,” she said.

Down the street, the crew from NWCCOG was already working on another home. Spreetstra had told me that nationwide, weatherization programs help only 3% of qualified people.

“I try not to think about that,” he said, “but we’ve got job security for a long time.”