

Keeping Warm While Keeping Costs Down

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A frequent concern of family caregivers, trying to assist an older loved one on a fixed income with their bills, is the escalating costs of home heating and energy during the winter months. If you are struggling with this issue here is some information that you might find helpful.

Are you, your neighbors, and family prepared for the winter ahead and expected higher energy bills? The U.S. Department of Energy's Information Administration has predicted heating oil costs to rise 25.6% this winter and those who use propane could also see costs rise 20.2% compared to last year's prices. There are many in our community who are looking for tips on saving money and energy in their home.

It is not too late for homeowners to consider home improvements that will help keep costs down as the weather gets colder. Tips to lower your energy bills include:

- The water heater in your home is usually the third highest energy expense in your home. Lowering the water temperature to 120 degrees will save a few dollars each month.
- Storm windows can reduce your heat loss by 25% - 50%. As an alternative, you can improve your windows with plastic sheeting installed on the inside. Caulk, seal or weather-strip leaks and cracks around windows and doors reducing air leaks which can save 10% on home energy bills.
- Clean or replace furnace filters once a month. Check heating ducts for air leaks.
- Clean warm-and-cold air registers, and make sure furniture or curtains do not block them. Shut the doors of one or two unused rooms. Use sunlight by opening the blinds and curtains on the sunny side of the house during the day and closing these at night.
- Add insulation to attic or wall space if needed. Proper insulation can save about 20% on home heating bills.
- Dress appropriately for the weather and set your thermostat to the lowest comfortable setting. On winter nights, extra blankets can provide warmth while turning back your thermostat even more. Programmable thermostats are available for purchase and may save a homeowner about 10% on heating and cooling bills for the year.
- Using a microwave to cook meals uses about half the energy of a conventional oven. When cooking, keep the lids on pots.

- Washing clothes in cold water instead of hot is another energy saving tip that can save an average home about \$50 each year. When drying clothes, use a clothesline when possible.
- Turn off electronic products when not in use such as lights, TVs, computers, etc. You can also activate “sleep” modes on electronic products that power down the equipment when not in use for a while.

There are many programs and resources in our community available to qualified seniors and low-income customers who may be eligible for home heating help. Utility companies may specialize in home heating discount plans or special payment plans. Gift of Energy certificates may be purchased from Consumers Energy to assist those in need.

Resources are available on the web such as the “Be Winter Wise” program found at www.michigan.gov The Michigan Energy Assistance Directory provides information on private and public programs that offer energy assistance by county lists. These are also located at www.michigan.gov/documents/bewinterwise

Homeowners can find out if their energy use is above average by taking the Home Energy Analysis located at www.energystar.gov

The new Federal Energy Policy Act provides tax credits for certain residential and commercial energy improvements installed in 2006 and 2007. Find out more information at www.michigan.gov/energyoffice

For more tips on saving money and energy at home, access energy saver materials at www.eere.energy.gov/consumer/tips

In Kent County, individuals needing assistance can call the 2-1-1 program through the Heart of West Michigan United Way for information on available resources.

Homeowners don't have to spend a bundle to keep their energy costs under control. By selecting a home improvement energy plan and prioritizing the projects, homeowners will be winter wise in energy savings and conservation.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the Caregiver Resource Network. The **Caregiver Resource Network** is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.caregiverresource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.