

## Leaders call for relief from natural gas cost

By MATT CAMPBELL  
The Kansas City Star

Kansas City leaders must put pressure on Missouri immediately to ease the burden of unthinkably high gas bills for low-income people, neighborhood and City Hall officials said Wednesday.

The group called for loosening income guidelines and other rules on utility-assistance programs and for tapping the state's \$6.7 billion tobacco settlement to deal with the crisis.

"There are people in this city who don't have heat," said Councilwoman Mary Williams-Neal, who called Wednesday's meeting. "I have been in grocery stores and churches and just about everywhere and the citizens of this city have come up to me personally and they want to know what we are going to do about this issue."

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### Cold facts on keeping warm

December's deep freeze and natural gas prices are forcing many people to spend a year ago are sending heating bills through the roof.



Source: Bloomberg News



The Kansas City Star

## BILLS: Officials appeal for relief from gas prices

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A sense of urgency is spreading as people on fixed or limited incomes open their Missouri Gas Energy statements and find bills totaling several hundred — or even thousands of — dollars.

"Most of our neighbors in Santa Fe get \$900 or \$800 a month," said Rosemary Lowe of that central city neighborhood association. "It's a matter of medication, heat and eating."

Many elected officials are absent from City Hall this holiday week. But Bob Jackson, who heads the city's home weatherization program, and Jan Marcason, executive director of the Mid America Assistance Coalition, on Wednesday began drafting a plea for help.

They hope Mayor Kay Barnes and the City Council will pressure state lawmakers, who gather next week in Jefferson City. Specifically, they want the General Assembly to use part of the windfall from the settlement with tobacco manufacturers to make more emergency money available across the state to help people pay their gas bills.

"It's supposed to be used for health issues," said Bob Mohart, director of the city's Neighborhood and Community Services Department. "It isn't a health issue. I don't know what is."

Another priority is for the state Department of Social Services to ease eligibility requirements for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. The federal government funds that program, but the state administers it.

The state agency limits eligibility for the fund to people whose annual income is no more than 110 percent of the poverty level. For a family of four, that means \$18,755. But in Kansas, state Rep. David Adkins of Lenwood, who was elected to the state Senate in November, has said he would introduce legislation next month that would raise that

"We feel there is money there to be had," Marcason said. "We know it could go out faster."

The Mid America Assistance Coalition on its own administers about \$300,000 a year in private funds for utility assistance. The money comes from people who add dollars to their utility payments for an assistance fund and from Project Warmth, which this year raised 22 percent more than last year.

Still, the average household aided by the coalition receives just \$125 — from all sources — in a year.

Missouri Gas Energy began warning people last summer that winter bills would be painful and to urge weatherization and conservation. Spokeswoman Pam Levezow said the utility has allowed people to continue to sign up for the level payment plan even into winter, contrary to industry norms. And earlier this month the utility began reconnecting people who earlier had been shut off for non-payment.

Those people will have heat, but they still will be accumulating a backlog of higher and higher bills.

A measure before Kansas City's Finance and Audit Committee would suspend the city's 2 percent "emergency" utility tax to offer people a little break on their bills. That may not be much, but people who are hurting would say every bit helps, said Councilman Troy Nash, who supports the measure.

Other jurisdictions have taken or are considering measures to lighten the burden of skyrocketing heating bills.

The Independence City Council last week agreed to temporarily reduce by 40 percent the gas franchise tax charged to residents. And in Kansas, state Rep. David Adkins of Lenwood, who was elected to the state Senate in November, has said he would introduce legislation next month that would raise that