

## We'll keep the light on for you

*BY JUDY VAUGHN –*

Fueled by publicity and the after effects of deregulation, the California energy crisis is testing The Salvation Army's casework resources throughout the state.

In both the Golden State and Del Oro Divisions and the northern part of Southern California, the Relief for Energy Assistance through Community Help (REACH) program has brought many new people to the Army's doors requesting help.

Many are seniors on fixed incomes embarrassed to find themselves asking for help for the first time in their lives. Some have said they would rather go without food than face a 15-day or 48-hour notice which would threaten to turn off their power. Many are people who, no matter how hard they try, never seem able to catch up on past due bills. All come from households where energy bills have doubled, even tripled, this month.

Sponsored by Pacific Gas and Electric and administered by The Salvation Army in corps and service extension units throughout northern and central California, REACH has helped over 400,000 households since 1983 when it was created. This year, before the rainy winter months began and before gas bills skyrocketed, over 16,000 households had already been helped.

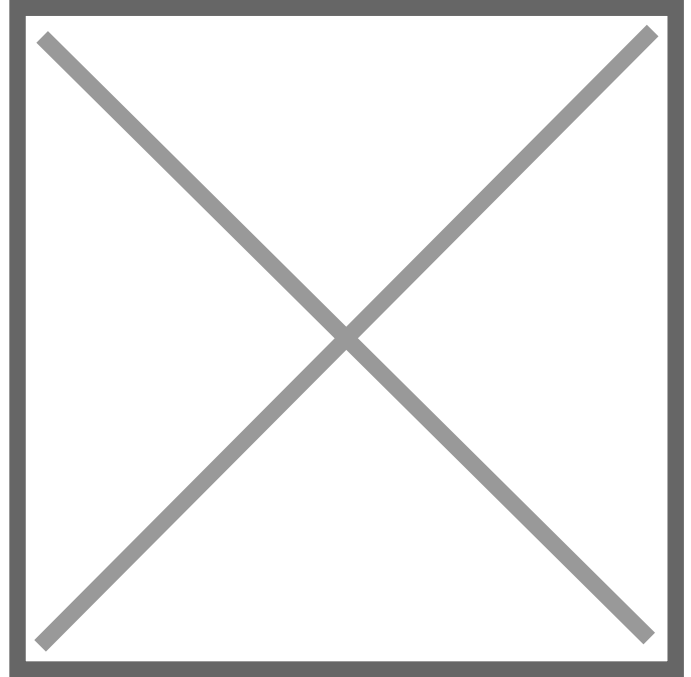
As cold weather set in and rolling blackouts became a recurring threat, an 800 number was installed to handle the rush of calls from people asking if they were eligible for assistance. For the last two months, the phones at Golden State divisional headquarters in San Francisco have consistently tallied nearly a thousand calls a day. REACH Director Nancy Udy is in charge. She reports that three workers in her office answer the phones and process applications throughout the day. In the field, numbers are equally dramatic. Modesto, Fresno and Sacramento have had exceptionally high increases in applications.

REACH provides once-a-year assistance to low-income customers who experience "a sudden uncontrollable or unplanned change in the ability to pay their energy bill." In the past, this has generally meant assistance to households facing unexpected hospital or medication bills, dental expenses, bills for car repair, loss of a job or loss of a roommate to help pay the rent.

Today, calls come from an 84-year-old retired schoolteacher too ashamed to wait for a 15-day notice on her \$248 bill in order to be eligible for the program, an "overqualified, unemployed research assistant" afraid to risk a bad credit rating because he can't pay his bill which has doubled from \$35 to \$70, a 30-year-old single mother with an 8-year-old, a 3-year-old, and a baby with the sniffles. She keeps her kids in hats and sweaters and the thermostat at 50 degrees and says, "How can I keep them healthy?" Struggling to keep afloat, she works the graveyard shift. When she leaves the office after receiving assistance, she seems quite overwhelmed and very quietly asks for one more thing. "Can I have a hug...?"

PG&E has expanded the program this year to meet the greater need. Customers are now eligible if their incomes are up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, approximately \$34,100 for a family of four. Previously, the income limit was 150 percent.

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Additionally, in anticipation of higher gas bills, the maximum assistance level will be \$300 (up from \$200) through April, 2001. REACH is privately funded by donations from customers and employees of PG&E. Donations are matched by shareholders. The utility pays administrative expenses.

Golden State Divisional Commander Lt. Colonel Richard Love reports that Salvation Army case workers and volunteers are well suited to administer the program. "People living from paycheck to paycheck may come to us in search of energy assistance, but we often find they have many other needs. Winter bills are especially stressful. Within our resources, The Salvation Army will do everything we can to help."

People in need of help should call their local Salvation Army or 1(800) 933-9677.