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Shut-off notice? Contact Duke by next Tuesday

By Mike Boyer*mboyer@enquirer.com*

State utility regulators Wednesday urged low-income residents who have received an electric or gas shut-off notice from Duke Energy to contact the utility before the state's 90-day shut-off moratorium ends Tuesday to make payment arrangements or seek other assistance.

"This is one case where customers have to be proactive and call the utility if they've received a shut-off notice," said Shane Eisenstein, spokeswoman for the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. "The utility can shut them off starting Wednesday, if they haven't."

The PUCO doesn't have data on how many consumers statewide were eligible for the shut-off ban implemented Dec. 18 at the urging of Gov. Ted Strickland. Residential customers whose income is at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty guideline, i.e., \$36,137 for a family of four, were eligible.

Duke Energy last week sent out letters to more than 35,000 customers in its Southwest Ohio service area who met the income qual-

ification for the moratorium. About 1,200 customers have responded to initiate payment plans, a spokesman said.

The PUCO Wednesday extended its annual winter reconnection order from April 15 to April 30 at the request of the Ohio Department of Development to give the agency more time to distribute crisis aid to families under the Emergency Home Energy Assistance Program.

Eligible families can use E-HEAP once a winter to maintain or reconnect service but are required to enroll in the state's Percentage of Income Payment Plan.

The Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency, which handles E-HEAP applications, had a Wednesday night forum with representatives from Duke and several agencies to answer questions about seeking assistance.

Herbert Walker, who administers the community action agency's E-HEAP program, said between 8,000 and 10,000 families will get assistance this winter, about the same as in previous years.