

Rising winter costs

Welfare agency Doncare is struggling to help desperate cash-strapped families

Welfare | Shaun Turton

AN increasing number of cash-strapped Manningham residents have shivered through winter's low temperatures and now face the stress of high utility bills.

From June to July, welfare agency Doncare experienced a staggering 400 per cent increase in people asking for help to pay energy bills – some of which had blown to more

than \$1000. Winter and summer utility costs always cause a big influx of people seeking help from the organisation, which can pitch in small amounts to help families struggling to cover the cost of gas and electricity.

But Doncare's Angela O'Brien said this year was showing unprecedented higher costs, leaving Doncare helpless to dig many families out of a black hole of debt.

Ms O'Brien said about 150 people applied for bill assistance last month, and August was again proving a tough month for local families.

"This year the bills are bigger and the clients are more frightened and desperate," she said.

"Each year our contribution stays the same while the bills go up, leaving a bigger gap for people to cover."

Ms O'Brien said most were forced to choose between keeping their

utilities connected and things such as doctor appointments, car repayments and school camps for children.

The Victorian Council of Social Service's Sarah Toohey said electricity bills had risen by 25 per cent on average over the past two years.

Ms Toohey said fixed incomes such as NewStart, parenting payments and pensions had not increased by half that much.