

Transcript for Cheryl

Cheryl is a home daycare provider living and working in the North Austin neighborhood of Chicago. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama and moved to Chicago when she was 19 years old. She's a mother to her son and daughter, and a grandmother to her four grandkids. Many of Cheryl's neighbors are seniors and long-term residents of North Austin like herself.

"Living in this house is good. We've been here since 1985. We got a lot going on with the daycare, so I've been doing that for like 20 years and the kids love it here. The kids grew up here and now their kids are growing up here. It's been a really nice neighborhood. We're a very close knit block, the neighbors look out for each other. We KNOW each other. And that matters."

Cheryl's home is a Chicago bungalow that was built in 1916. This type of brick construction home was incredibly popular in the early 20th century, providing homes to Chicago residents across the whole city. Inspired by the California cottage of the 19th century, local architects and builders adapted this West coast bungalow-style home to suit Chicago's climate and narrow lots. The Chicago bungalow is therefore unique to the city and is known for its low-pitched roofs and generous number of windows. There are currently over 80,000 bungalows still standing in the city, representing nearly a third of Chicago's single-family housing stock.

"It's a bungalow so it's old. I like the style and structure of the house. The basement is just open so I can use that for the daycare. The attic, it goes from the front to the back. There's plenty of space up there and we filled it with a lot of stuff."

Like the bungalows, there are many other types of single-family homes in Chicago that are nearly a hundred years old and are rich in architectural history. In fact, about 49% of all single-family units in the city were built before 1940. These older homes were made to last—today they make up an important part of the affordable housing stock and are great options for first time homeowners. However, as buildings age, they can be difficult to maintain, especially if the house still has some of its original features.

"It's just a couple things that kind of concern me. Like I said the stairs and my chimney- it's crumbling, it really is crumbling a lot. So I need to have that repaired. I like the porch, it just needs repaired. It needs a lot of work 'cause it's old. I think those are the original stairs."

Like many of us, Cheryl not only thinks about the maintenance of her home, but also about paying her utility bills. She thinks about her family's energy use when she can.

"My daughter is a stickler for that. You could be in a room and she'll turn the light out on you. But we try to not have the lights on if we don't really need them. I keep the temperature low— not low but you know, normal. I rarely turn it up. I don't do that. I like it, not cold but cool. I can sleep better like that at night. And chasing these kids around I don't need a lot of heat, so I'm good."

Using less energy is important but it's often not enough to keep utility bills affordable, especially when energy prices spike globally. The price of natural gas, for instance, went up a shocking 35% over two years, from February 2020 to February 2022.

"It concerns me sometimes. First, my husband passed in 2019 and that's been a big change. But you know, I get his social security and then I work doing the daycare so that keeps me afloat. And the utilities, I'm on payment plans with them. Like the gas bill, it's really high now. It's expensive, and I really don't make enough to just every month be able to pay it off. The most that I use the utilities is during the day with the daycare. I have to have a light."

Energy is a basic need for all households and families. We need electricity for cooking, keeping the lights on to do schoolwork, keeping the home the right temperature, and so many other things. When energy prices get to be too high, some families have to make painful trade-offs between paying their utility bills or buying food and medications. In fact, a national survey found that over 25% of U.S. households are forced to limit or go without basic necessities in order to pay their energy bills. Additionally, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 impacted millions of Americans' ability to work, which only worsened their ability to pay bills. Cheryl, for example, ceased the operation of her daycare during the lockdown, which in turn made it even harder to afford utilities. She was one of nearly 50 million people unable to work in early 2020.

"I really cut back. I really cut back. And that's basically it. I pay what I can. And hopefully, maybe the next month I can catch up. That's how I've done it before but like I said now I'm on a payment plan and that's working. It was kind of tough at first when I didn't have daycare, you know I didn't have that income so that was a little tight for me."

For families needing help, support like the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, also known as LIHEAP, is available and crucial to helping with utility bill payments. However, in Illinois nearly one and a half million households qualified for LIHEAP, but only 15% of them received support in 2021 due to lack of funds. When Cheryl was unable to get bill assistance, she found her own way to manage paying her utility bills.

"I tried getting help from LIHEAP. I got a letter saying I was denied and I was like okay. And maybe I should have tried again this year but I didn't, I just got on the payment plan. And that's working for me, that's really working for me. I'm on that with all my utilities: with the gas, the light, and the water. So that helps a lot."

Cheryl also enrolled in a program that helps day care providers upgrade their homes to be safer and healthier for children. With this program, Cheryl was able to replace her old windows and doors that contained lead paint. Through this work, she improved the safety of her house for the children she cares for, and helped to save energy. Older windows are often a source of energy loss at home. When it's hot outside, heat can seep inside and drive up the temperature. In the winter, the heat can escape the home when trying to warm it. This movement of warm air is responsible for up to 30% of a home's heating and cooling energy use. When Cheryl had her windows replaced, she was able to conserve some of this energy and also make her utility bills more affordable.

"When Elevate came and removed the old windows and replaced them with the new ones, it made such a big difference. I don't feel the air—the draft coming in like I used to. The windows look really nice. They made the house look different like it had a face-lift. And they're easy to open. Now I can just raise them up and let them down. I used to prop them up before. They helped me out with that. I got new doors, my back porch was redone. They replaced all those windows. I mean it made a big difference, it did."

Older homes like Chicago bungalows may be affordable options for homeowners, but they often need upgrades to keep energy bills low. Cheryl's ability to manage her utility bills and find a program to improve her home shows how much agency a homeowner can have in finding solutions to energy challenges.

Sources:

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