

Transcript for Gladys

Gladys is a homeowner living in the Hermosa neighborhood of Chicago. She lives in a frame construction style house that was built in 1907 with her daughter, who now has three children of her own.

“I’m retired, been 20 years. I’m 81 years and I’ve lived here for 45 years so that’s been a long time. And actually this house was abandoned I think and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association fixed it up. Now I live on social security and I have a little pension and that pays for my Medicare, which keeps going up.”

Since she’s retired, Gladys’s fixed income from her social security and pension have to cover all her costs. When costs like Medicare go up, it greatly impacts people like Gladys. From 2021 to 2022, Medicare premiums went up a whopping 14.5%, which is one of the largest increases in the history of the program.

In addition to rising prices, unexpected events can also be costly – especially when it comes to home maintenance. For example, nearly twenty years ago Gladys experienced a fire in her house. While home insurance typically covers the majority of these unforeseen costs, sometimes home owners have little control over how the repairs are done.

“Well when I had the fire, I had that contractor but he put everything cheap in here. The flooring going into the kitchen is peeling off. Cheap cabinets that are just falling apart. And I had flooding in the basement, twice now. Yeah, it’s just when you have a house. It’s okay when you’re younger, but when you get older you just don’t have the money to fix things.”

Beyond the unexpected maintenance costs following a fire or a flood, people living in older homes like Gladys’s often see much higher utility bills than newer homes. In fact, homes that were built before 1950 and use natural gas spend an average of 27% more on space heating than those built after 1980. And for most people, like Gladys, a natural gas bill is not their only utility bill.

“Well I’m on the budget with the gas and that’s \$373 a month I pay for gas on the budget, maybe because the house is old. It’s drafty and I was putting the heat up and they said I went over. It’s very hard to pay \$373 a month for gas. Yeah I pay \$200 a month in electric too. I pay a lot. That’s \$600 right there.”

Despite paying high energy bills, Gladys and her family still have challenges keeping their home comfortable in extreme temperatures.

“But it’s cold down here. In the winter it’s cold. Because I notice this window here is not double framed, it’s only one. So it’s cold. Well I have an electric heater I use for myself ‘cause I’m down here. But that makes my electric go up higher. And plastic, we put plastic all over. It still don’t help. It’s still cold.”

In addition to putting plastic over the windows, Gladys and her daughter have to put a blanket at the foot of the front door to seal off the large draft that comes in. They run into similar temperature issues in the summertime. Her daughter explained that because the central air conditioning doesn’t work, they have to rely on window units upstairs, one for each of the three bedrooms. Because the house gets so hot on the second floor, they’re forced to run the window units consistently during the summer months, which causes the electric bill to skyrocket.

“They all have air conditioners. Yeah, units you put in the windows. Yeah, they run it all the time. I get big electric bills.”

Like so many Americans, Gladys has felt the sting of rising prices and it has greatly impacted her financial wellness.

“It’s hard. It’s hard because I can’t put money away, I try to save money and I can’t. You never know how the bills are going up all the time. Credit cards. You end up using credit cards, so then you’re stuck in a bigger cycle because you are using credit cards because you don’t have the money. And then you have to pay those credit bills. It’s horrible.”

The stress that comes from unaffordable energy bills can greatly impact a person’s mental health. As Gladys and her daughter point out, nobody feels good when they don’t have any money. Research shows strong correlations between families experiencing poverty and mental health concerns.

And while utility bill and energy assistance programs exist, finding the right program can often be a challenge in itself. Sometimes families struggling to get by are not sure where to even go for help. Gladys’ daughter encouraged her to start looking for assistance when her bills started getting out of control.

“I don’t really know what to do for that. That’s why she was talking to me that I should try to get help. And I said well maybe I should because it’s overwhelming me. Especially because everything’s going up. Before it wasn’t so bad, but now everything’s going up and it’s hard. Especially for food and stuff. We go to the food pantry down here and that’s a donation one. People donate food there.”

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