



Winter turns up heat on crisis

CHRIS HALL

Guest Columnist

THE housing affordability crisis in the northern suburbs is putting an increased demand on our emergency relief services, with help needed by families and individuals primarily for food, utility bills and rental repayments.

When most of your budget is spent on keeping a roof over your head, there is little or nothing left for your remaining expenses. In winter, this pressure intensifies with the costs of heating or buying medication for a sick child.

We see families that do not have the flexibility in their budget to deal with these extra costs come winter.

Caroline (name changed to protect

her privacy) came to UnitingCare West's office at Merriwa trying to re-establish her life having suffered a violent relationship. She had moved into a new rental property with her three children but was unable to get the gas connected, because of a previous outstanding account of more than \$600.

She was on Centrelink benefits and having completed a budget with her, we found that the maximum she would be able to manage to pay to her gas account was \$10 a week.

Discussions with the gas company revealed it was not willing to negotiate, unless most of the account was cleared. By co-ordinating the efforts of a number of agencies, we were able to clear more than 80 per cent of the account in a

lump sum and offer Caroline's commitment to pay the remainder at \$10 per week until cleared.

Caroline's gas was connected and she has now set up a \$20 deduction each fortnight from her Centrelink benefit to meet future gas accounts.

Since June 1, we have turned away 361 families and individuals seeking emergency relief. This equates to 90 West Australians per week who are not making ends meet.

To help us help more people, I encourage you to donate to UnitingCare West's Winter Appeal by calling 1300 663 298 or by visiting www.unitingcarewest.org.au.

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chief executive, UnitingCare West