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NEWS

More South Australian homes cut off over unpaid electricity bills

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South Australia's ageing infrastructure and spiking use during heatwaves are often blamed for large bills. *Source: News Limited*

SOARING electricity prices mean more than 2660 SA homes had their power cut off in the first quarter of this year.

The latest figures from the Australian Energy Regulator show the number of disconnections are up from an average of 2473 a quarter the financial year before and 1845 the year before that.

At this rate there will be more than 10,000 disconnections this year, double the rate of a decade ago.

South Australia has consistently had the highest rate of disconnections, according to analysis by Victoria's Essential Services Commission. The state's ageing infrastructure and spiking use during heatwaves are often blamed.

Uniting Communities spokesman Mark Henley said people hit by "energy stress" reached the stage where "they just don't look at the mail".

"They know there are bills there," he said, "and what can they do about it?"

Mr Henley also said there were good hardship programs for people who were struggling, but they were not always easy to access.

He would like to see a minimum level of supply so people who can't pay can still do basic things such as keep a fridge going.

"With water, even if you can't afford to pay current rates you need to be able to wash and cook and have a drink, so there's a low-flow option," he said.

AER chairman Andrew Reeves said that would be "technically very difficult" but said the AER was working with welfare groups and financial counsellors as well as reviewing how retailers offer their hardship programs so people can access them and they're "not just documents on a shelf".

About half the homes disconnected get reconnected within a short period, he said.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has declared power prices to be "too high".

On Tuesday, a spokesman for the Prime Minister said the Federal Government would work with the State Government "to minimise future price pressures and deliver a more affordable supply of electricity to the state".

"The Prime Minister shares the concerns of South Australians about electricity prices ... (they) affect our business competitiveness as well as individual consumers," he said.

The spokesman said the Government had got rid of the carbon tax (in favour of a floating price) while keeping compensation for it, and had strengthened the AER's "ability to prevent over-investment in our poles and wires".

Opposition energy spokesman Ian MacFarlane said a Coalition Government would abolish carbon pricing to bring down power prices.

They would also reform the energy market to make it more competitive and would "beef up" the national regulator to give it "more strength and more teeth to control prices and costs", he said.