



Thousands going without power as electricity bill defaults skyrocket

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South Australia has some of the highest prices for electricity in the world. *Source: Supplied*

MORE than 10,000 households had their power disconnected after failing to pay their bills - the highest cut-off rate in almost a decade.

Figures released by the industry regulator yesterday showed that 10,100 homes lost power in the 12 months to July, compared to 7300 the previous financial year.

Soaring power prices are being blamed for this 38 per cent spike in disconnections, with welfare groups reporting those on fixed incomes suffering the most - including one man who had to resort to cooking his meals over a wood fire in his back-yard for six months after being disconnected.

Welfare agency Anglicare said it had reports of disconnected households commonly using candles for lighting, heating rooms with barbecues - and keeping perishables such as milk and butter in Eskies.

Retailers are being asked by the Essential Services Commission of SA to be more flexible when dealing with "consumers experiencing genuine financial hardship", because it is essential they have "continued access to energy".

The number of reconnections is only about a third of the number of disconnections recorded in 2011/12, the figures show.

"While people can reduce their electricity use, they still have supply charges which they can't control," said Anglicare wellbeing manager Christine Bell.

"More needs to be done, and one example we are looking at through international research is where people can make payments fortnightly and not be hit with a big quarterly bill."

Welfare agency financial counsellor Ian Small said the rise in electricity prices - which jumped \$319 on average last financial year - was to blame for the increasing number of people "we see who are suffering stress with their power bills".

"It is a really deep social concern that so many people are being cut off and having to live without electricity because it's a health hazard," Mr Small said.

Under the state Energy Retail Code, retailers must offer an instalment payment plan to householders before disconnection from supply.

And householders seeking to save on costs can find the cheapest deals based on their power consumption by using the Energy Price Comparison calculator at escosa.sa.gov.au