



## VISTA Energy Program

Contact a VISTA Energy Program Volunteer in your community to learn how to save money on your utility bills.

<b>Kwethluk</b> , Sam Nicori	757-6022
<b>Goodnews Bay</b> , Lori Echuck	967-8929
<b>Nome</b> , Jennifer Demir	443-4259
<b>Quinhagak</b> , Fannie Moore	556-8167 ext 414
<b>Russian Mission</b> , Delores Housler	584-5511
<b>Seldovia</b> , Dorothy Flint	234-7643
<b>Tyonek</b> , Julie Johnnie	583-2209
<b>Unalakleet</b> , Teri Paniptchuk	624-3622



# Broke: Rural Alaskans hurting under pressure of rising energy costs

by Shauna Hegna

Can you afford your utility bills? More and more people can't. Rural Alaskans pay some of the highest utility and fuel rates in the country.

People in Unalakleet are paying \$4.85 for a gallon of gas but Teri Paniptchuk, a Unalakleet resident, says "that's nothing; you should try to buy heating oil - it costs \$5.35 a gallon."

Jeanette Flint lives in Seldovia and paid \$300 a month for heat and \$300 a month for electricity last winter. A \$600 utility bill would hurt anyone's wallet but "especially in Seldovia", explains Flint, "because a lot of the residents are low-income and can't afford the high cost of energy."

Paniptchuk and Flint got tired of seeing their rising energy bills and cringing from their outrageous amounts. They joined eight other people from rural communities across Alaska to do something about it.

2007 marks the first year of the VISTA Energy Program (VEP), a program that helps rural Alaskan communities reduce the burden of energy costs. RurAL CAP recruits and trains VISTA volunteers from ten rural communities across Alaska to educate people about energy use and to help them decrease their use.

Earlier this summer, VEP volunteers from Kwethluk, Quinhagak, Russian Mission, Unalakleet, Seldovia, and Tyonek attended training in Kwethluk. They learned how to do a home energy consumption audit, including how to calculate the cost of running appliances and how to calculate electric cost savings.

VISTA Leader Lisa Michaels explained, "we did the workshop in the Kwethluk city building where we were staying. We measured the electrical usage of all the appliances in the building and calculated the monthly electrical cost of running the appliances based on Kwethluk electric rates. We discovered a stand-alone freezer that cost \$50 a month to run and which contained only two small

bags of food." The VISTA volunteers moved the food to the fridge's freezer box and disconnected the stand-alone freezer. City officials thanked the volunteers for a move that will save them more than \$600 a year on their electric bill.

Since going to the training, Paniptchuk has started to do energy audits in Unalakleet. In a community that regularly registers temperatures well below zero in the winter, heat bills can skyrocket during the coldest months of the year and break homeowners. Paniptchuk and her fellow VISTA volunteers are knocking on doors in their communities and hooking up meters to lights and appliances to see how much they cost to run. Homeowners are often shocked to see what they're paying to light an empty room and wash their clothes in hot water.

Ellen Kazary, community development manager and supervisor of the VISTA Energy Program, said that "rural folks are so inundated with surveys and questionnaires that they usually don't want to do another survey, but it's the opposite with energy. People really need help." Kazary recounts a story of a woman pulling out a huge envelop bursting with a stack of fuel bills. She couldn't figure out why she was being charged \$400 a month in utility bills for a small two-bedroom home with three lights and a fridge. "She was ashamed that she couldn't pay her bill, but who could blame her? \$400 a month would be hard on anyone's pocketbook."

"What people don't realize," said Kazary, "is that it can cost almost as much to run your TV when it's off as when it's on." Many appliances use phantom power - they suck electricity from the outlet even when they are turned off. "You can save money by plugging multiple appliances like your TV, DVD player, and satellite dish into a power strip and turning the power strip off when you're not watching TV."

Now more aware of how to save energy and her pocket book, Paniptchuk has caulked and weatherized the windows and doors in her own home. "I live in a



really small home and still pay close to \$250 for two months of heating oil.” She’s hoping to see a big change in her utility bills this winter.

In Russian Mission, where it costs more than \$5 for a gallon of heating oil, Delores Housler, VEP volunteer, is working to decrease costs for people. She has already completed five home energy audits and people are shocked by what things are costing them. “There was a refrigerator that was costing a person \$20 a month. I told them to clean the coils in the back of the fridge,” said Housler. This simple step can save people a lot of money on their electric bill.

“Most people can save a lot on their energy bill if they just change their habits,” said Kazary, “if they turn off lights when they leave a room, unplug appliances when they’re not using them, and wash only full loads of laundry with cold or warm water. People in the ten villages with VEP volunteers are getting it.

Paniptchuk has seen the biggest change in her 13-year-old son. “Now he turns off lights and unplugs appliances after he uses them.” But even the older generations can learn to change bad energy habits. “My grandma is hard to change but she’s getting it and started to turn off lights when she leaves the room.”

VISTA volunteers are also encouraging their neighbors to replace their regular incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights (CFLs). It costs \$16 a month to use a 100 watt incandescent bulb for 12 hours a day in Kwethluk, whereas a 100 watt CFL light costs only \$4 a month to run for the same amount of time. Multiply that savings by the number of lights most of us have in our homes and people could save a lot of money.



So if people can save money using CFLs, why aren’t more people using them? Kazary explains that, “people have trouble pulling together the initial money to buy the CFLs since they cost three to four times what normal light bulbs cost.”

In Unalakleet it costs \$14.99 for a pack of four CFLs, but there are cheaper ways to get the bulbs. Paniptchuk said that she was able to order a six pack of CFLs from Wal-Mart for \$15.16, including shipping. “The initial cost is more but you save in the long run,” said Kazary.

So how much money can you really save? Paniptchuk’s grandma paid over \$340 a month for electricity in Unalakleet. Paniptchuk did

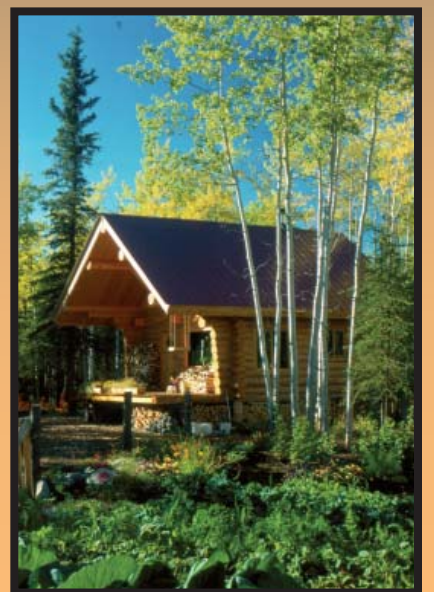
a home energy audit and determined that much of her grandma’s energy use was from incandescent light bulbs and the cost of running her water heater. Paniptchuk changed out all of her grandma’s light bulbs to compact fluorescent lights and told her to turn her water heater off at night. She talked to her about shutting off her lights and appliances when she wasn’t using them. Her grandma’s electric bill was cut in half which will likely save her over \$2,000 this year.

“After the VISTA volunteers did energy audits in Kwethluk and people realized how much money they could save,” explained Kazary, “the local store sold out of CFLs.” ●

## Put Your Electric Bill On A Diet! Electricity Saving Tips and Information

- 1** **Clean refrigerator and freezer coils twice each year.** Save electricity by helping your appliance operate more efficiently. Use a coil-cleaning brush, and then vacuum with an extension tube.
- 2** **Keep freezers and refrigerators full, even with containers of water.** Once things are cold or frozen, the appliance will not have to turn on so often. Also, keep these appliances in cool places.
- 3** **Some appliances use electricity even when turned off ! This is called Phantom Power Loss.** Control this by plugging major appliances such as TVs, VCRs, satellite dishes, stereos, computers etc. into a power strip and then switch the power strip off whenever the appliances are not in use.
- 4** **Compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFL bulbs) use about one quarter the electricity,** and produce the same amount of light! By using compact fluorescent lighting you are saving 75¢ of every dollar you would otherwise spend on electricity for incandescent lighting. Compact fluorescent light bulbs last six to ten times longer than incandescent bulbs!
- 5** **Standard fluorescent light fixtures can be upgraded.** Electronic ballasts and thinner, T-8 light tubes can save about one-third the amount of electricity used by the older ballasts and T-12 tubes.
- 6** **Save money by using less than 500 kWh per month!** Electricity in rural Alaska is subsidized through Power Cost Equalization (PCE). In many villages PCE only applies for the first 500 kWh per month. Beyond this level electricity may cost 50% more! How many kWh did you use last month?

- 7** **No Cost Actions:** Turn off lights, computers and other appliances when not in use. Wash only full loads of laundry with cold or warm water. Avoid using halogen lighting.
- 8** **When purchasing new appliances, make sure they are rated for energy efficiency.** Look for the “Energy Star” logo or similar markings indicating an energy saving appliance.



- 9** **An insulating blanket on your electric water heater can save up to 10% of the energy used.**
- 10** **Budgeting and financial planning for electricity costs:** You can change the amount of electricity you use according to your living practices. The Power is in your hands! ●