

Light bills a heavy load for CHA residents

Over the years, some have piled up tens of thousands in debt to ComEd

The Robert Taylor housing project would seem a most unlikely place to find anyone with a \$10,000-plus electric bill.

The apartments have no air conditioning. The stoves operate on gas. Only a small percentage of residents own washers or dryers. The heat is provided by the CHA. It isn't what you would call an electricity-intensive environment.

But here among some of the poorest of Chicago's poor, all you have to do to find a ComEd bill from Hell is to ask around.

\$1,998 ... \$1,066 ... \$3,348 ... \$11,596 ... \$18,000.

Beauty Turner was helping me do the asking. Until a couple of months ago, she lived here in the 4525 S. Federal building.

Turner is what you might call a journalist-activist. She writes for a number of small publications in town, most notably the nonprofit

Residents' Journal, and takes her social activism beyond the computer screen. She stuck it out at Robert Taylor for 11 years, partly because she was poor and partly to help make a difference.

One of Turner's current concerns is that unpaid—and unpayable—ComEd bills are going to ruin the future of many Robert Taylor residents who are being relocated under the



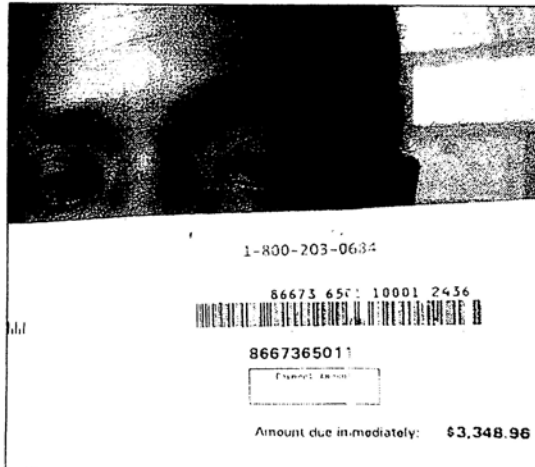
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CHA's plan to demolish all of its high-rises.

Anyway or another, Turner believes, the whopping bills will trip up the residents, either by preventing them from receiving a voucher to move into private housing or by leaving them so irretrievably in debt that when they do move, they eventually will be cut off by ComEd and end up without a home.

"A realistic concern, but I wanted to see for myself to understand how the bills got so high.

The 4525 building is scheduled to be closed by the end of September, but there was still plenty of activity there one morning this week, starting with the young men in control of the central corridor who scurried into action with one approach. Turner talked our way past them and into the elevator, the only time it



BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES

Robert Taylor Homes resident Ramona Mathis shows her electric bill for \$3,348. Some residents fear the bills will trip up their moving out.

would arrive when beckoned on this particular visit. The rest of the time sent us up and down the narrow stairwell, Turner's selection of high heels proving a major mistake despite matching her favorite blue outfit.

Joyce Smothers, 28, couldn't quite explain her bill for \$1,998, offering a theory that it might have something to do with her move from the 11th to the fifth floor.

"I'd be getting bills, and I paid them," Smothers insisted, questioning whether ComEd really reads the meters in the building.

Louisa Samuel's bill is only \$1,066, but with food stamps her only source of income, she doesn't see any hope of ever erasing it.

Ramona Mathis, 42, owes \$3,348, but she hasn't received a new bill in a while, she says, because the CHA is trying to evict her. It has something to do with the CHA's one-strike policy and an accusation against her son by the building management, who she says couldn't have been involved because he was already in Cook County Jail at the time.

"I only get income from my kids. Their father died," Mathis said.

This is the murky world of those who live on the precipice of survival, never more than a false step from obliteration. Paying the light bill—or even contesting it—doesn't seem to have been at the forefront of their concerns. Until now.

Mary Reed, 54, a resident since 1980 and the building president, understands the situation. We interrupted her as she prepared meals for a subsidized lunch program for the children in the building.

The problems started for her when she fell

behind on her bill long ago during a six-month stretch with no income. She tried to catch up for a while, but then gave up. When her electricity was cut off, she learned how easy it was to go into the utility room and turn it back on. When the late charges and penalties piled up, there was no turning back.

"There's no excuse. I'm not trying to make excuses," said Reed, who nevertheless acknowledges that the CHA and ComEd have some responsibility for letting the problem get so far out of hand for so many.

At first, she was too embarrassed to tell me how much she owes.

More than \$10,000?

"Yes."

Less than \$20,000?

"A little bit."

Later, she allowed that her balance is about \$18,000. She said she knows others with bills in the \$20,000 to \$22,000 range.

Reed said the Robert Taylor tenants' problems with bills have been unable to work out a bud- get with ComEd, which is supposed to be a requirement for eligibility for replacement housing.

"If we could pay that bill, we wouldn't be living here," she said, making perfect sense.

But ComEd spokeswoman Margaret Smith, despite expressing sympathy, made it clear that ComEd wants its money, and she suggested that bills so large are indicative of irrational behavior.

"They find a way to reconnect themselves legally. This is an unlawful practice," she said. "In situations that are indicative of fraud, there really isn't much we can do. . . . We have to be fair to all our customers, all of our ratepayers. We have to be consistent."

I wonder if ComEd consistently lets tenants in private apartments get so far behind.

CHA spokeswoman Kathryn Greenberg assured me that anyone whose electric bill is so high will be moved to another public housing apartment.

"Nobody's going to end up homeless because they have a big ComEd bill," she said.

I'm not so sure.

Turner introduced me to Lithia Crafterson, who just moved her family out of the S. Federal and into a house in the 6600 block of South Lowe, which she obtained with her Section 8 voucher. Henderson showed me the \$11,596 light bill from her CHA apartment, which she never resolved with ComEd before moving.

When I told her the house looked nice, she didn't even smile. "I'll be out of it," she said. "If I can't keep the lights on."

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