

# Rising energy costs and poverty collide in rural Ontario

By **Brian Hill** Associate Producer Global News <https://globalnews.ca/news/3080057/rising-energy-costs-and-extreme-poverty-collide-in-rural-ontario/>

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- They know the battle between eating and heating first hand
- Kemp works part-time as a school bus driver while Burnette is a mechanic currently out of work. They live in the Kingston Ont area.
- The lack of work has left them far behind on payments to Hydro One
- Their current bill was \$1,418. Next month, Hydro One told them that next payments would be about \$1,000 and then the bill comes in and its \$3,142
- Then the power was cut off. In the basement the sump pump had no electric so could operate and about 3 feet of flood water accumulated. The mold started growing and reached six feet. Because there is no sump means they are not insured for the damage. The stinch in the basement was terrible. Burnette says “it makes you sit down and cry, is what it does.” Mel says, “taking a shower is something you cant do anymore.” “Its even difficult to have a good meal in these hard times.”
- They finally got a generator which they run four hours a day, to bring the heat up to temperature and charge the batteries, then run on batteries and 2 or 3 inverters
- Rising hydro rates are driving a lot more Ontarians into energy poverty. They cannot afford internet, cellphone, so they cannot communicate their need and condition to the outside world, said Francesca Dobbin, United Way to Global News reporters
- No power is driving people into hospitals, driving them into mental health facilities. She says the need for electricity should be considered a human right and not denied or overpriced

Climbing down the narrow staircase toward the darkened basement, the smell of mold and rotten drywall hits you hard. The musty stench of nearly three feet of water that until recently filled the lower level of Mel Kemp and Peter Burnette’s Kingston, Ont. home fills the air.

“We’re very concerned for our health,” said Burnette. “I’ve got asthma and I notice it’s a lot harder to breathe now.”

The black mold stretches nearly six feet high in some places. It reaches from the sewage-smelling insulation that once covered the basement’s walls to the ripped-out ceiling panels Burnette has started to remove.

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The washing machine and dryer, neither of which have been used in 3 months, are filled with the stagnant remains of heavy flooding that occurred sometime near the end of August. A lone filthy sock rests at the bottom of the dryer.

“No one should have to live like this,” says Burnette, who’s jerry-rigged, gas-powered generator is plugged straight into the home’s existing wiring. It provides just enough electricity to keep the power running and fridge turned on for about four hours a day.

“With no working sump pump the insurance won’t cover any of the water damage,” said Kemp. “We can’t run everything at once. We can run the furnace for a little while and then turn it off and run something else.”

Kemp, 57, is a school bus driver. Burnette, 59, is an unemployed mechanic.

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The couple have been without electricity for nearly three months. Their services were disconnected by **Hydro One** over what Kemp says was roughly \$1,200 in missed payments.

“They said our bill was going to be a little over a \$1,000,” said Kemp, who keeps track of the household finances. “Then the next bill that comes in it’s over \$3,000.”

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Kemp and Burnette did receive \$500 help from Ontario’s Low-income Energy Assistance Program (LEAP), but in the end, it wasn’t enough to prevent them from being disconnected.

“It’s frustrating, extremely frustrating,” said Kemp in a shallow voice while wiping tears from her eyes. “You know, we’ve basically lost everything or are in the process of losing everything... We’re doing the best we can to try to get things going, but trying to save up a huge amount of money when you’re in this situation, it’s just impossible.”

Sadly, Kemp and Burnette's story is not unique. As [Global News first reported](#), nearly 60,000 households in Ontario were disconnected by their electricity distributors for non-payment in 2015. Hydro One, the province's largest utility distributor, was responsible for nearly 10,000 of these disconnects. The company was owed more than \$105 million in unpaid bills from customers at the end of last year.

Like many rural Ontarians, Kemp and Burnette find themselves living in the dark – struggling to survive under the weight of rising electricity costs and precarious working conditions.

“At that point [July] both of us, we had no money coming in and we had to kind of wait for unemployment insurance to kick in,” said Kemp. “We contacted everyone that we owed bills to and discussed the situation with them. Everyone else was willing to work with us, but not Hydro One. They were already saying ‘Well, you’ve already been behind and we can’t do much about it.’”

Neither Kemp nor Burnette are employed full-time.

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As a school bus driver, Kemp works part-time roughly nine months a year.

Meanwhile, Burnette, who, when he does find work, says he often ends up being laid off just as soon as Ontario Works employer benefits run out, feels he's trapped in a vicious cycle of moving from one low-paying job to the next.

“I’m definitely trying,” said Burnette. “I’m on the internet constantly when I can get on to find out what jobs are available. I’ve got umpteen hundred resumes out and I just got to keep plugging away at it.”

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Still, the physical and emotional toll of living without electricity is paralyzing at times. The couple says it's the sort of thing you don't wish upon anyone.

“You can't do basic things like taking a shower,” said Kemp. “Having a good meal, those are the sort of things that keep you going in the hard times, but it's difficult to do that now.”

Burnette is less optimistic when asked how living without electricity makes him feel. “Like I'm going to cry,” said Burnette. “Or roll over and die, one or the other.”