

Crews make some progress on ice storm outages

By KRISTIN M. HALL – 7 hours ago

MURRAY, Ky. (AP) — Utility crews made some progress Friday in restoring power to the more than 1.3 million homes and businesses darkened by an ice storm that crippled states from Missouri to West Virginia, but thousands were still bunking in toasty shelters because their homes had no water or heat.

At Murray University in southwestern Kentucky, brothers Jim McClung, 42, and Dale Earnest, 38, were among those resting in every corner of a university theater. Some sprawled in aisles, propped in chairs or curled up on the stage. They, like many others, ran out of food and water at their frigid, powerless home.

"I had no idea the storm was going to last this long," McClung said.

Utility companies struggled through ice-encrusted debris into Friday morning as they worked to restore power, but warned it may not return until Saturday at the earliest. It could take until mid-February for some to come back online in the hardest-hit areas of Kentucky and Arkansas.

"I know everybody, including myself, would like this to be over today, tomorrow or yesterday," said Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, who toured some of the damage Thursday. "It's going to take several days, if not weeks, to dig our way through all of this all across the state."

For some, things were getting better. About 60,000 had power restored since Thursday, and with warmer temperatures predicted for the weekend, crews could make "substantial progress" in the next few days, said Public Service Commission spokesman Andrew Melnykovich. Still, some 547,000 homes and businesses were still in the dark — including about 172,000 in Louisville.

Deputies trekked door-to-door in many communities to let people know where shelters were, forced to spread the word the old-fashioned way because cell phone and Internet service was spotty. In some towns, volunteers checked to make sure their elderly and disabled neighbors were all right.

Many Kentucky hotels offering discounted "power outage rates" reported being fully booked with people escaping frosty neighborhoods. Those who hunkered down in their homes face long lines to buy generators, firewood, groceries — even bottled water because power outages crippled local pumping stations.

As power came back on in the northwest corner of Tennessee, Kentucky residents flocked there for supplies. Obion Co. Propane Gas general manager Ken Walker said more than 200 people came to his Union City shop to fill propane tanks. On an average day he has 5 customers.

"They are bringing their propane clinders, camper bottles and whatever else they can to do what it takes to stay warm," said Walker.

Truckloads of ready-to-eat meals, water and generators from the Federal Emergency Management Agency were expected to arrive Friday at a staging area in Fort Campbell, Ky., said Mary Hudak, a spokeswoman for FEMA's southeast region.

In Paducah, Amber Fiers and her neighbor Miranda Brittan tried a half-dozen filling stations before finding one where they could buy kerosene. The two were in a line that swelled to 50 or more at the 13th Street Station, which began pumping kerosene after its owner set up a generator.

"We got food, but I'm just worried about staying warm," said Brittan, who lives in Mayfield, adding she was frustrated by the search for supplies.

"By the time you hear about a place that's open they're out when you get there," she said.

Roads were still littered with ice-caked power lines, downed trees and other debris. Help from around the country was arriving in convoys to assist the states with the worst outages.

At a mall turned into a staging area in Barboursville, W.Va., crews in hard hats met Thursday alongside piles of poles, generators, wire and other supplies to find out where to go first.

"We're attacking it head on," said Appalachian Power spokesman Phil Moye. "As long as the ice is still on the trees, the storm is still here."

St. Louis-based AmerenUE said it had added 800 workers to power restoration efforts in southeast Missouri, and another 800 were expected Friday.

In central Kentucky's Radcliff, John and Elsie Grimes lost power Monday night and needed police help to get out of their trailer and to a shelter Thursday morning set up by the local NAACP.

"I've been sitting 'round for two days, eating cold hot dogs and bologna," said 70-year-old John Grimes, describing what he ate at home before coming to the shelter. he uses a wheelchair, is blind in one eye, and a diabetic.

Since the storm began Monday, the weather has been blamed for at least 38 deaths, including six in Texas, nine in Arkansas, three in Virginia, six in Missouri, two in Oklahoma, two in Indiana, two in West Virginia, six in Kentucky and one in Ohio.

Emergency officials feared that toll could rise if people stay in their homes without power for too long, because improper use of generators can cause carbon monoxide poisoning. In Kentucky, three of the deaths there were likely due to carbon monoxide poisoning, authorities said.

Jimmy Eason was among those who decided to tough it out anyway in Velvet Ridge, Ark., gingerly stepping across his yard, watching for icicles falling from electrical wires. He was headed to his Ford F-150 pickup truck, which was warmer than his one-story house.

"I'm sleeping in a car, which is just fine," Eason, 74, said. "There's nothing wrong with a car. Every couple of hours I turn it on, I let it run for 10 minutes and that keeps it pretty warm."

Eason was trying to avoid boredom, and drove to Burger King to get a meal because he was tired of eating cold soup. "It's kind of a chore to occupy your mind. I'm used to doing things and keeping busy," he said. "You just have to endure a couple of days and it will be all right."

Contributing to this report were Associated Press Writers Dylan T. Lovan, Brett Barrouquere and Bruce Schreiner in Louisville, Ky.; Daniel Shea in Velvet Ridge, Ark.; Juanita Cousins in Nashville, John Raby in Charleston, W.Va.; and Betsy Taylor in St. Louis, Mo.

(This version CORRECTS overall death toll to 38, not 35.)