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Business

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Jeralene Talley says Gas South's Pay-As-You-Go plan has been a money saver for her.



LaToya Scott, with 5-year-old daughter Anaya Ramos, says that she's delighted that after a year of paying bills on time she qualified for a better rate. Photos by Kathy Mitchell

Utility takes innovative approach to serving customers during tough times

by Kathy Mitchell
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Tough economic times have driven many companies to look for innovative ways to meet their customers' needs. Three years ago, Gas South introduced a program called Pay-As-You-Go[®], designed for credit-challenged customers. It does not require customers to make a deposit or other pre-payment before being accepted for service.

Some customers, including Decatur resident **Jeralene Talley**, also find that they save money with a pay-ahead utility plan. "I was with another gas company, and my winter bills were outrageous—around \$300 a month. Since I've been on this plan my bills have been a hundred something—no more than \$200 in the winter and as little as \$20 a month in the summer," said Talley, who lives in a six-bedroom home occupied by four people.

She explained that unlike traditional payment plans under which customers are billed for gas after they use it, Pay-As-You-Go is a pay-ahead plan. The gas company estimates the charges that the customer will incur over the next 30 days based on historical gas usage at the residence. The customer is billed and has 20 days to pay. The next bill will contain an estimate for the next 30 days, and will also include a "true up" that reflects the difference between what the company estimated for the prior month and what the actual charges turned out to be.

Although the state's regulated provider is required to provide natural gas service to anyone regardless of credit history or abil-

ity to pay, the regulated provider can require large deposits from customers with poor credit histories, according to Gas South officials. Customers also may be affected by rate volatility or required to pay rates that are often higher than those offered by other natural gas marketers. Gas South officials say that rate stability is another benefit of the program.

According to Gas South, more than 11,000 households currently receive natural gas service through the Pay-As-You-Go program. The utility reports that the program is the first of its kind in Georgia.

“We are very pleased to be able to provide natural gas service to many customers that other natural gas providers might require to pay huge deposits or refuse to provide service to at all,” said **Kevin Greiner**, president and CEO of Gas South. He noted that many local community service agencies, including CredAbility (formerly Consumer Credit Counseling Service), the Salvation Army, United Way, Society of St. Vincent DePaul, MUST Ministries and the Atlanta Community Food Bank, have partnered with Gas South to raise awareness of the Pay-As-You-Go program among the communities the agencies serve.

Greiner, who takes over next year as chairman of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, said, “The Pay-As-You-Go program has proven to be a very important option for people who are credit-challenged or facing financial difficulties because there is no prepayment required and our rates are very affordable.”

He added that customers who establish

a good payment record with Pay-As-You-Go for 12 consecutive months become eligible to switch to one of Gas South’s standard rate plans for even more savings. Since the program began, more than 6,200 Pay-As-You-Go customers have been able to transition to Gas South’s standard rate plans.

That was the experience Decatur resident **LaToya Scott** had. “As a full-time student with a full-time job and a child, I was very interested in the Pay-As-You-Go plan when a friend told me about it. I was pleased with the rates and the customer service. I was really surprised when after a year, they called me and told me because I had always paid my bills on time I was eligible for another plan with an even lower rate.”