

Delegation announces \$3.9 million for Vermont home heating assistance

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Burlington, VT - U.S. Senators Bernie Sanders and Patrick Leahy and Congressman Peter Welch announced the release of \$450 million in home heating emergency funds, including \$3.9 million for Vermont.

As prices for home heating fuel soar to record highs this winter, Sanders has introduced legislation, cosponsored by Leahy, which would increase funding for the Low Income Home Heating Assistance Program by another \$800 million. Welch introduced companion legislation in the U.S. House.

"The outrageously high price of home heating fuel is stretching the budgets of millions of families across the country," Sanders said. "Federal funding to help the most vulnerable people, including many seniors, is running out across Vermont. While I welcome this release of funds, the president should release \$160 million remaining in the emergency fund immediately. People in Vermont and across this country must not go cold this winter. When the Senate reconvenes this month, I will bring to the floor legislation which has bipartisan support which will increase LIHEAP funding by \$800 million. Vermonters cannot afford to go any longer this winter without this necessary support."

Leahy said, "This release of these emergency funds is welcome news that we have been asking and waiting for. With high heating costs pressing down on thousands of Vermont households this winter, we already know that additional funds from the LIHEAP reserve will be needed in our state after this."

Welch said, "This critical funding is long-overdue. The high cost of heating fuel is crippling family budgets, threatening the well-being of many Vermonters already struggling to get by. Congress shouldn't have to continue to drag this president into recognizing the emergency so many Americans in cold-weather states face."

The U.S. average retail price for home heating oil soared 5.4 cents in one week in mid-January to a record \$3.40 a gallon. The national heating oil price was up 98 cents from a year ago, the U.S. Energy Information Administration said in its weekly survey of heating fuel costs. It was the fourth week in a row that heating oil hit a record.

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In Vermont, community action programs on the front line of a severe heating crisis this winter already are running out of money. As of last week, for example, the Central Vermont Community Action Council had exhausted its entire \$206,000 LIHEAP budget, and is negotiating with the state for more money. An additional \$400,000 in LIHEAP funding is needed to make it through the rest of the winter, the council projected.

The number of households receiving home heating assistance under the federal and state partnership program increased by 26 percent from 4.6 million in 2003 to about 5.8 million in 2007. During the same period, federal support for the program went up by only 10 percent. As a result, the average grant declined from \$349 to \$305 while energy prices continued to rise. The result has been a significant decrease in the program's purchasing power.

According to the energy assistance directors, states plan to reduce the number of households served by about 15 percent in the absence of additional federal and supplemental state funding. The result would be a decline in the number of households served from about 5.8 million in 2007 to 4.9 million during the coming year.