

FOR PLANNING PURPOSES
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KENNEDY ON LIHEAP FINAL PASSAGE

Today's Senate action adding \$1 billion for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program for this winter was a step in the right direction. It was the best we could do, and it deserved to pass. But no one should be under the illusion that we've now provided adequate assistance to millions of struggling families around the country, many of whom are elderly and disabled. The additional \$1 billion is less than half what is needed to fully fund LIHEAP and guarantee the assistance these families need and deserve. A small step is better than no step, but it's still far from meeting the obvious need.

Countless citizens in communities throughout America live year-round in constant fear of power shut-offs because they can't pay their energy bills, and they have no confidence that either Congress or the President is on their side.

According to a report by the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association, since the winter of 2001-2002, the average yearly cost of heating oil has soared from \$627 to \$1474, natural gas from \$465 to \$1000 and propane from \$736 to \$1286. Yet, the Republican Congress and the Bush Administration continue to ignore the fact that millions of Americans can't afford these steep increases.

Democrats have pressed for months to fund LIHEAP at the authorized level of \$5.1 billion for the current fiscal year. We've urged Congress to act, but the Republican majority has blocked our efforts at every turn, and they continued to try to block our efforts to obtain an additional \$1 billion for the program today. Families are paying a steep price for this neglect. The average LIHEAP grant has decreased by almost 10 percent since 2002, and is now only \$288.

In Massachusetts, the state government has provided \$20 million in additional funds for LIHEAP this year.

Low-income families are more fortunate in our state than in most other states on this issue, but we have exhausted all federal funds, and need is still great. Even the poorest households with the highest bills will get no more than \$840--less than half what is needed to get through the winter.

As Self Help, a community action program in Avon, Massachusetts states, "Many of our clients have exhausted their benefits...The bottom line is that we need some kind of relief, as quickly as possible."

ABCD, a community action agency in Boston, reports that as of January 17th, the number of applicants applying for fuel assistance for the first time increased by 26 percent. Its clients are currently exhausting all of their fuel assistance benefits. Even a benefit of \$765 buys only one tank of oil at today's price of \$2.40 per gallon, when at least two or three tankfuls are needed to get through the winter, and no other source of funding is available.

These aren't just numbers. They represent real people facing real hardships. For example, an elderly couple lives in a modest home on the outskirts of Haverhill and both receive social security benefits. Their home is heated with oil and they use an old woodstove in the basement to supplement their steam boiler. Their \$525 LIHEAP grant covered one delivery of 256 gallons of oil in late November. Attempting to cut wood for the woodstove, the husband fell from a ladder and was injured. If LIHEAP had been funded fairly, his injury could have been prevented. With this bill, the chances are 50-50 that his injury could have been prevented. We could have done better, and we should have done better. It's wrong to let people like this suffer.

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