



ABCD Press

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 28, 2008

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Advocates Join Forces to Prevent Human Tragedy This Winter

State's "Unmet Need" for Home Heating Assistance Estimated at \$250 Million

A diverse group of supporters representing elders, fuel companies, poor families, health care organizations, environmental groups and religious organizations across the state have joined together to demonstrate the critical need for significant increases in home heating assistance this winter in Massachusetts.

They estimate it will take \$250 million to keep heating assistance at the same level as last year, which still left tens of thousands of families with empty oil tanks and caused well over 100,000 households to fall significantly behind on their utility bills, with the risk of shut-off imminent. Anticipated Fuel Assistance funding for the 2008-09 winter currently stands at only \$83 million. Last year it was \$137 million.

"Right now projected benefit levels for families seeking fuel assistance next winter are at half of last year's level and fuel prices have doubled," said Robert Coard, President/CEO of Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD). "It's a recipe for disaster."

ABCD and 23 fellow Community Action Programs across the state have formed an unprecedented advocacy coalition with Massachusetts Association of Older Americans, Massachusetts Home Care, Massachusetts Councils on Aging, Massachusetts Oil Heat Council, Massachusetts Law Reform, New England Fuel Institute, Conservation Law Foundation, Environment Northeast, United Way of Massachusetts Bay & Merrimack Valley, American Red Cross of Massachusetts Bay and National Consumer Law Center joining together to communicate the critical need for increased fuel assistance to avoid human tragedy this winter. They are planning a "Fuel Aid Energy Summit" to share information, develop strategies and make issues related to this crisis visible.

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“At present, the \$83 million in federal fuel assistance funds for Massachusetts will provide a maximum benefit of \$503 for the poorest families in a program serving 150,000 low-income households,” said Joe Diamond, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Community Action Programs (MASSCAP). “With heating oil predicted at \$5 a gallon or more, it will take \$1,375 to fill an oil tank. Families need about three tanks to get through the winter. It’s beyond scary.”

Last year funding for home heating assistance in Massachusetts totaled \$137 million, with the federal government providing over \$120 million through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) plus \$15 million from the state. That combined funding translated into a maximum benefit of \$1165 for households most in need.

“Heating oil prices have jumped 85 percent from this time last year,” said Charlie Harak, Energy Attorney at the National Consumer Law Center. “And natural gas prices could easily be 20 percent higher this coming winter, leading to even more low-income families losing their utility service than last year.”

Recent analysis done by the National Consumer Law Center shows that 125,000 low-income gas and electric customers are well over \$100 million in total arrears on their bills. NCLC estimates that utility terminations will increase 20% and more at most utilities over the summer, and that tens of thousands of residential utility customers will have their service terminated.

On July 16, 21 Northeast lawmakers sent a letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asking that Congress triple LIHEAP funding to \$9 billion and requesting an additional \$1 billion for weatherization programs to help homeowners conserve energy and save money. Last week four New England governors asked the federal government to increase heating assistance for New England to \$1 billion from \$252 million last year.

"Skyrocketing energy prices demand action on several fronts," said Derek Murrow, Director of Policy Analysis at Environment Northeast. "In addition to meeting the essential LIHEAP need, we must also begin to develop longer term investments in energy efficiency through expanded Weatherization Assistance Program funding and a commitment to efficiency programs for all heating fuels."

Sue Reid of the Conservation Law Foundation also emphasized the importance of energy conservation programs in order to reduce dependence on costly fossil fuels. Reid urged that government should engage in "rapid expansion of programs to deliver energy efficiency and conservation to all customers, especially those most vulnerable to volatile energy costs."

“The ability of our community to come together around the needs of Massachusetts residents is critically important and a positive sign for our state’s ability to climb through economic challenges,” said Michael K. Durkin, president and CEO of United Way of Massachusetts Bay & Merrimack Valley.

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"Religious organizations are worried about the new energy crisis," notes Rev. Robert Murphy, who is a parish minister on Cape Cod. "In the first week of July, I received ten calls from people asking for energy assistance. I've been involved with fuel assistance programs for many years but I've never seen a situation this bad in Massachusetts."

"We have never seen energy prices like this," said Coard of ABCD. "Last year, with prices half of what is predicted for this winter, we saw terrible suffering from the cold. Unless we see dramatic increases in LIHEAP and significant help from the state this winter, we will see real tragedies. This shouldn't happen in the richest country in the world. We need solutions now before the cold weather hits."

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