



Mass Home Care

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Elder Advocates Turn Up Heat For Fuel Aid

Massachusetts Needs To More Than Double The Governor's Fuel Aid Request

Agencies serving Bay State elders are predicting a “no heat, no eat” winter for many senior citizens. Locally, Marilyn L. Travinski, Executive Director of Tri-Valley, Inc. said the agency covers 25 south Central Massachusetts towns and is providing support to more than 4,000 low-income homebound seniors. Many of these seniors could find themselves without heat or food this winter thanks largely to rising fuel and food costs.

A coalition of groups representing elders, fuel companies, poor families, health care organizations, environmental groups and religious organizations across the state have joined together to ‘turn up the heat’ on federal and state lawmakers for increased funding for home heating assistance this winter.

“New England is facing a financial Katrina,” said Al Norman, Executive Director of Mass Home Care. “It’s predictable---but it’s a disaster we can avoid—if we take action now.” Mass Home Care wrote the Governor in early June asking for a summit on energy and food costs. The Governor recently announced he would do just that. The Governor also set aside \$20 million in a supplemental budget request for emergency energy aid, but Mass Home Care says that number needs to be \$50 million. A recent report by the State Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, chaired by Senator Marc R. Pacheco, agreed that Massachusetts needs to contribute at least \$50 million to the fuel aid fund.

Mass Home Care estimates that 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. More than 100,000 households fell behind on their utility bills, the group said. Federal fuel assistance for the coming winter heating season currently stands at only \$83 million, only 60% of the \$137 million the Commonwealth received last year. Yet fuel oil prices have doubled.

“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 \$1,165 for households most in need.

“Heating oil prices have jumped 85% 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.

In a letter replying to Mass Home Care, Governor Patrick said, “Rising energy costs weigh heavily on all our minds right now, and I take your concerns very seriously.” The Governor promised to have the Secretaries of Energy, Elder Affairs, and Health & Human Services contact Mass Home Care “to discuss the most effective ways we can deal with the very real concerns you outline in your letter.”

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