

SENATOR JOE SCARNATI



Legislative UPDATE

LOW INCOME HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

SEPTEMBER 2006 • 25TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

Despite last season's mild winter, some Commonwealth residents paid record-high heating bills due to skyrocketing energy costs. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support a decrease in energy costs for this year's winter months.


Last year's shock in energy costs was too much for some households to absorb. Some families and seniors living on limited fixed incomes reported making difficult decisions between purchasing food and prescription medicines and paying their heating bill. Some households even reported missing a mortgage payment.

Households - especially those with elderly family members or young children - must be adequately heated to provide a healthy living environment. A family should not have to compromise safety by keeping a house at too low of a temperature.

That is why I co-sponsored Senate Bill 1270, known as the Heat On Act. This legislation, which is supported on a bipartisan level, would maximize the use of federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) dollars and ensure that heating aid reaches as many Pennsylvania families as possible.

The bill also plans to expand eligibility while providing several accountability provisions to ensure that funding goes where it is needed most and to prevent abuse of the program.

If you have any questions regarding home heating programs or other state government issues, please feel free to contact one of my offices.

Sincerely,

Joe Scarnati

Legislation Seeks to Expand Home Heating Assistance Program

Last year home heating costs drained the budgets of low and fixed income families and seniors. For the first time in history, the Commonwealth supplemented its federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funding to ensure that households in need received assistance. However, this was a temporary solution to a long-term problem.

To address this growing concern, I recently co-sponsored Senate Bill 1270,

known as the Heat On Act. If signed into law, this legislation would maximize federal LIHEAP dollars through an annual state contribution, permanently expand the eligibility requirements for LIHEAP and ensure greater accountability to prevent abuse.

Last winter, eligibility guidelines for LIHEAP were temporarily increased from 135 percent of the poverty level (\$26,123 for a family of four) or less to 150 percent of the poverty level (\$29,025 for a family

of four) or less. If Senate Bill 1270 is signed into law, the eligibility requirement would be permanently raised to 150 percent of the poverty level or less. This expansion will increase eligibility by approximately 70,000 additional households statewide.

In addition to expanding eligibility, this legislation would require LIHEAP-participating energy vendors to offer customers budget billing which distributes payments

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Legislation Seeks to Expand Home Heating

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equally over 12 months to eliminate the sharp increases in energy costs that can occur over the winter months.

The Heat On Act would also authorize the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to increase program accountability by requiring applicants to verify their household income to help prevent program abuse. DPW would also be required to audit and monitor funds, providing the General Assembly with copies of these reports.

To receive assistance from LIHEAP, residents do not have to be on public assistance nor do they need to have an unpaid heating bill. Both homeowners and renters are eligible to apply for the program and the money does not need to be repaid.

To apply for LIHEAP, contact your local County Assistance Office which is listed

on this mailer. Online applications are also being accepted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Access to Social Services' (COMPASS) website at www.compass.state.pa.us.

LIHEAP applicants will be required to submit the following information:

- Names of people in household.
- Dates of birth for all household members.
- Social Security numbers for all household members.
- Proof of income for all household members.
- A recent heating bill.

In addition to the LIHEAP program, many utility suppliers are offering supplemental assistance plans to help struggling households. Consumers should check with their heating fuel and electric supplier for details.

Brochures with more information can be found on the StayWarmPA website at www.staywarmpa.com.

To Apply for LIHEAP assistance, contact your local County Assistance Office.

Cameron – 814-486-3757

Clearfield – 814-765-7591

Elk – 814-776-1101

Jefferson – 814-938-2990

McKean – 814-362-4671

Potter – 814-274-4900

Tioga – 570-724-4051

Warren – 814-723-6330

LOCAL AREA AGENCIES ON AGING

Cameron, Elk and McKean – 800-672-7145

Clearfield – 814-765-2696

Jefferson – 814-938-2990

Potter – 814-544-7315

Tioga – 570-265-6121

Warren – 814-726-1700 or 800-281-6545

Questions & Answers

Q - What can I do to assist others in my community who are struggling with heating costs?

A - There are several ways to help your local community members cope with rising energy costs. Many local church and community groups accept donations to assist at-risk and low-income families and seniors during times of financial crisis. Additionally, these groups often accept blankets and coats to distribute to those in need. You can assist an elderly relative or neighbor by regularly checking on them to make sure they have heat and are in good health. You can also donate to utility-sponsored hardship funds such as the \$1 Energy Fund. For more information on this program, visit www.dollarenergy.org or call 800-683-7036.

Q - What do I do if my utility service has been shut off?

A - If your utilities have been shut off and you are in immediate physical danger, dial 911. If your service was disconnected because you did not pay your bill, contact the utility company immediately and make payment arrangements to restore service as quickly as possible. Most utility companies offer "budget plans," which balance energy costs by charging the same amount every month. You can also ask if you qualify for assistance programs such as the \$1 Energy Fund. Visit the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission's website at www.puc.state.pa.us and click on the "Consumer Education" link for a detailed listing of energy assistance programs, including those offered by utility companies. Older adults can contact their local Area Agency on Aging for assistance.

Q - Is assistance available to help weatherize my home?

A - Yes. The Pennsylvania Weatherization Assistance Program provides direct services through public and private non-profit agencies to increase the energy efficiency of dwellings occupied by low-income residents. The program prioritizes low-income residents at higher risk including older adults, individuals with disabilities and families with children.

Q - Is assistance available for older Pennsylvanians?

A - Yes. Although it varies from region to region, most Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) do offer some direct winter weather-related assistance, such as providing emergency shelter to older adults who are without heat. AAA will also help older citizens complete and submit applications for LIHEAP along with other assistance programs. For more information, contact your local Area Agency on Aging as listed above.



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