

Mass Home Care Press Release
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State Lawmakers Heat Up Fuel Fund

STATEWIDE--Advocates for the elderly and low-income families scored a major victory this week when the State Legislature added \$21.2 million in state funding for the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Mass Home Care initiated this effort back in November by approaching the National Consumer Law Center to work with us to set up meetings with key state lawmakers. From there, the support of local Community Action Programs (CAPs) was sought, and the advocacy effort began.

A meeting was held with State Senator Katherine Clark (D-Melrose) on November 22nd, and a second meeting took place with Rep. Paul Donato (D-Medford) on December 1st. Mass Home Care and advocates asked lawmakers to consider a fund of \$30 million in fuel aid. The language had a provision that if federal funding exceeded \$150 million, that the state funding would begin to revert back to the state coffers.

On January 11th, the House Ways and Means committee, led by Rep. Brian Dempsey (D-Haverhill) reported out a supplemental budget for FY 2012 that included \$21.2 million in new state funding for the fuel aid program. The House budget was adopted on January 18th, and the Senate concurred the following day, on January 19th. In all, it took nearly two months for advocates to achieve the added state fuel funding---but as a result---as many as 21,000 new households will be able to get fuel assistance this year. This state funding represents the 15th time that state funds have been added to the federal program to help low-income seniors and families cope with winter heating expenses.

Last year Massachusetts received approximately \$182 million in Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funding from the federal government. This year, the state is slated to receive \$132 million, \$50 million less than we received last year. The state supplement of \$21.2 M brings the available funds to the level of \$153.2 M, or about 84% of what was available last year. Based on language in the House budget, if the federal funding exceeded \$163.77 million, the state funds would begin to revert back to the state. Federal funding for fuel aid is not expected to change at this point.

The Commonwealth's highest heating oil benefit for the poorest families is \$1,025 compared to \$1,240 in 2009. Compounding the pain is the rising cost of oil, up from about \$3 a gallon last year to \$4 a gallon today. At this price, the highest fuel assistance benefit will provide only one tank of oil. The average household needs three to four tanks to get through the winter. Last winter 250,000 Massachusetts residents received fuel assistance.

Because oil is so much more expensive this year than last (so far, \$.48 more expensive per gallon, a household that uses 800 gallons of oil will have to spend \$400 more than last winter for the same amount of oil. The \$1,025 in benefits will buy just

about 1 tank (275 g.) of oil. Households need 3 tanks of oil. This means many households will run out of oil sometime in January..

In some parts of the state, elderly households comprise as much as 20% or more of the applicants. Elders are particularly at risk for heating problems because they are more susceptible to hypothermia, live in homes that are poorly insulated, and go out less often than younger people—spending more time in a cold home.

“This state supplement for fuel aid is a great victory for seniors and advocates,” said Dan O’Leary, Executive Director of Mystic Valley Elder Services. O’Leary said he was proud that his legislative delegation in the House and Senate led efforts to secure the additional funding. “The classic dilemma facing seniors is a ‘heat or eat’ choice,” O’Leary explained. “We know that the total fuel aid this year will not be enough to protect all seniors who need this help---but it’s definitely going to warm up the homes of many of our frail elderly population.”