

Advocacy in Local Media



National Fuel Funds Network

Washington Action Day for LIHEAP

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One of the most powerful tools we can use in our efforts to communicate the importance of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and local fuel funds is contact with local news print and broadcast media — both with reporters and with newspaper editorial boards.

Successful media advocacy requires relationship building, even if it's just an occasional call to bring newspeople up to date on what is happening with your program or taking 15 minutes to have a cup of coffee with a reporter in order to get to know them better. At least once a year, however, you should make formal contact with local media representatives to tell them your story.

A face-to-face meeting —in which you provide reporters with some content for a story and leave information behind that they can use for reference — is the best way to make sure your story gets told.

NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL BOARDS

Background. While most writers at your local newspaper write about *news*, and you certainly don't want to pass up any opportunity for straightforward news coverage, a small group in the editorial department write *opinion*, or *editorials*.

For your purposes, opinion can be even more powerful than news stories. Unlike reporters, editorial writers do not have to tell both sides of the story. Their opinions can be biased. At election time, editorial writers have a lot of power when they endorse which political candidate they favor. Because politicians want their local newspapers' editorial endorsements, they are often swayed in their decision making by the papers' editorial positions on a variety of issues.

Thus, if a newspaper is going to write about LIHEAP, you want them to: 1) have their facts right, and 2) agree with your position.

Do not wait until you read an editorial before you contact the paper. By that time, it's too late. The writers have moved on to other topics. They have taken a position, and they will not reverse themselves and admit mistakes. They may permit you to write a "letter to the editor," but those, no matter how well written, can be perceived by some as whining.

How to contact your paper.

Call the newspaper switchboard and ask who is the editorial page editor. Then ask for that person by name. Do not be startled if that person answers the phone. Call before noon, as deadlines generally are early in the afternoon. Try to avoid Fridays. Writers are working on material for Saturday through Monday. When you ask for an appointment, be brief. Say something like:

"Hello. My name is _____. I am director of the _____ Fuel Fund. Within the next few weeks, congressional committees will be deciding on funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. In fact, they could abolish the program under the banner of budget cutting. Because _____ families in the area depend on this program, I would like to brief you or the appropriate editorial writer on key aspects of the program."

If a meeting date is set, send a note confirming the time along with a fact sheet not to exceed one or two pages.

You may want to bring an additional person, such as an articulate beneficiary of the program.

The editorial writer may say, "Please send me something in writing and I'll look at it." Since in-person meetings tend to be far more effective, suggest that you can hold your remarks to only 15 minutes. If that doesn't work, then thank him/her and send the information by mail.

Prior to the meeting, call NFFN or the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance in Washington (Bracy Tucker Brown, Inc., at 202-459-8855) to get the latest developments in Congress and the administration. They may have data on the your state that can be used to prepare a fact sheet for your use.

At the meeting, know the points you want to make. We suggest the following:

- LIHEAP is a block grant to the states, which can design their own programs. This is what Republican leaders say they want to do with federal programs.
- LIHEAP is leveraged. The average payment per household is about \$200 per year, so the recipient must use his/her own resources to come up with the balance.
- LIHEAP is efficient. Administrative costs by law are under 10 percent, and there is little corruption as most payments are made directly to the utility.
- If LIHEAP is cut, the cost of non-payments and cutoffs can be added to the rate base.

TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

1. **“Are you on deadline?”** If you want to introduce yourself or pitch a story idea, call when the newsroom is slow — usually before 9:00 a.m. or from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
2. **Help the reporter.** Drop everything, and try to get them what they need. Even give the phone numbers of opposing viewpoints, if appropriate. The reporter will appreciate it and remember you.
3. **Be honest.** If the reporter catches you on one slight error, you’ll lose your credibility. Be accurate to a fault. If you don’t know the answer, admit it.
4. **Make friends.** Help all reporters equally. That cub reporter for a weekly paper or radio station soon may be the anchor of the evening news or a reporter on the major daily. Freelance writers often will write for a trade publication, then rewrite it for a much larger publication.
5. **No thanks.** Don’t call to thank reporters for running your story. They didn’t do you a favor; you helped them by providing information. You *can* however call to say they did a good job.
6. **Drop it.** You should pursue a correction *only* if a story is egregiously inaccurate. Even then, few will see the correction. That’s life in the big city. Reporters hate crybabies.
7. **Another angle.** If you are turned down, repackage the idea for a different section of the paper or station, if appropriate. The first reporter may have some suggestions. For example:
 - How to save energy in your home/apartment — consumer affairs reporter.
 - Energy efficiency — environmental reporter.
 - Utility rates and low income assistance — business reporter.
8. **Follow up.** Are there additional insights and information that would help the reporter to write a follow up story? *Why* did the fire happen? *Why* did the couple freeze?
9. **The news flow.** How does your story fit into the news flow. Record cold temperatures, congressional budget cuts, tragic fire, etc.
10. **Avoid hastily called news conferences.** They’re a lot of work. Reporters don’t like them because everyone gets the same news at the same time. One leak will kill the story for the other media. All reporters are rushed, so the story is not well developed. It’s better to give it to the major daily or one TV station. News conferences are good for *major* news when you know all the media will cover the event — a very rare occurrence.

REAL RESULTS: MEDIA CONTACT IN 2004

- ***Lack of Heating Aid Means Many Left in the Cold***

April and Alvin Terrell rely on two kerosene heaters, three electric space heaters and layers of sweaters and coats to try to keep their four grandchildren and themselves warm after gas to their South Side two-flat was shut off in October. Despite this week's frigid temperatures, the Terrells and thousands of other families statewide are unlikely to be able to tap federal assistance to help get the gas turned back on. — *Chicago Tribune*, January 8, 2004

- ***Utility Bills Called “Crippling Burden”***

Low-income Montanans face “a crippling financial burden” paying their rising monthly utility bill, a national consultant told participants in an AARP Montana summit. Roger Colton, a Belmont, MA, attorney, said a \$61 million gap existed at 2002-2003 winter heating prices between Montanans’ actual home energy bills and what affordable energy bills were. — *Helena (MT) Independent Record*, February 3, 2004

- ***Need Escalates for Energy Assistance***

It’s been two weeks since Jose Escalante lost his job to a faltering economy. With his savings spent, he borrowed money and got help to cover the rent for his apartment. Now, he’s not sure how to come up with \$75 to pay this month’s light and power bill. He applied for help last week with Community Action’s energy assistance program. But with the nonprofit agency facing the heaviest demand it has seen in at least two decades, Escalante was placed on a waiting list with 900 other families. — *The Oregonian*, March 25, 2004

- ***Shutoffs Spur Pleas for Home Heat Aid***

The end of Indiana's winter moratorium on shutoffs has boosted applications for energy assistance and stretched application takers to the maximum. Susan Aldridge, volunteer coordinator at the Hammond Munster Salvation Army Corps, said it is also getting requests for help from people who are struggling to make ends meet after a winter of paying high heating bills. "The ones we see that break our hearts ... they are the elderly who pay their bills every month," Aldridge said. — *Munster (IN) Times*, April 7, 2004

- ***Poor Often Skip Medicine, Meals, to Pay Heating Bills***

It’s no secret that rising heating bills have taken a toll on poor families. But a study released Tuesday shed light on the full impact of energy costs for Missouri’s poor. Nearly half of the low-income households surveyed said they skipped meals and failed to take prescription medicines to pay heating bills. More than a third didn't buy books or school supplies for their children. — *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 8, 2004

- ***COOL Program is a Health-Saver for Sweltering Northern Virginia Residents***

Just because Linda Ellmore likes elephants and decorated her Frederick County home with a variety of mini-mammoths doesn’t mean she wants to live in a climate suitable for them. Respiratory illnesses hamper her ability to breathe when the temperature rises. She has found some help, however, through the Frederick County Social Services cooling assistance program. — *Winchester (VA) Star*, July 20, 2004

- ***Heating Oil Prices to Stay Hot for Winter***

If you think it's expensive to fill-up the SUV, wait until the fuel truck starts delivering this winter's heating oil. That's right; there will be no respite from summer’s high prices. The Energy Information Agency estimates it will cost consumers an extra \$100 to stay warm this winter using oil and \$179 more for natural gas. And those estimates are based on wishful thinking. — *Christian Science Monitor*, August 18, 2004

- ***Editorial: Continuing Hot Days are a Stark Reminder***

With the mercury approaching season highs ... few people are giving any thought to winter — which is why a conversation with David Fox is so chilling. Fox is communications director of the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance and, as such, has the unenviable task of persuading newspapers around the country to focus on the needs of the 30 million Americans who can't afford to heat their homes in winter or cool them in summer. — *Youngstown (OH) Vindicator*, September 3, 2004

- ***Editorial: Help With Heating Bills***

By winter, blasts of cold air again will penetrate poorly insulated older houses of thousands of low-income residents. Dials on natural gas meters will spin, driving up utility bills in the Kansas City area. Many homeowners will pay as much as they can. But when a gap remains, some will turn for help to local officials who run the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Unfortunately, Congress has not substantially boosted the program's funding in two decades. — *Kansas City Star*, September 13, 2004

- ***Editorial: Heating Help for the Poor***

Pretty soon, it will be getting colder. A lot colder. For most of us, this will merely mean the discomfort of higher heating costs. We say “merely” because for others, it will be about making cruel choices between eating, fixing the car, paying the rent or paying the utility bill. The good news is that some help is available for low-income families, including those in Wisconsin. The extremely bad news is that it may not nearly be enough. It doesn't have to be this way. — *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 26, 2004

- ***High Energy Prices Sting Low-Income Americans the Hardest***

For many Americans, the rising cost of energy is a financial nuisance, not a crisis. It's something to grumble about to a coworker or perhaps a reason to spend less on clothing and entertainment. But for Louise Rayo of Littleton, Colo., who takes care of her four children, ages 8 through 13, on disability pay of less than \$1,200 a month, high prices have already had serious consequences. — *Associated Press*, October 6, 2004

- ***Kansans to Get Help With Winter Bills***

Congress has appropriated \$2.2 billion for the 2005 fiscal year to finance the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. The \$2.2 billion is about \$300 million more than was available in 2004, according to the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, a coalition of advocates for the poor, allied organizations, energy industry trade associations and utilities. “Congress did the right thing by spending more on LIHEAP because higher heating costs this winter will be a severe burden for our most vulnerable citizens: the elderly, the disabled and low-income families with small children,” said Carol Clements, chairwoman of the National Fuel Funds Network, one of the member organizations of the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance. — *Lawrence (KS) Journal-World*, November 27, 2004

C ***Editorial: Cold-Weather States Get some Cold Comfort***

Senators from the blue states — blue as in cold weather — asked President Bush last week to release \$300 million in emergency fuel aid for the poor and low-income elderly after a blast of Arctic air hit the Northeast and a massive snowstorm buried the Midwest. In response, the Department of Health and Human Services said it would release \$100 million from the emergency fund. The decision means there is an additional \$200 million in the emergency fund — and no good reason why it should not also be released now. — *Springfield (MA) Republican*, December 27, 2004