



National Fuel Funds Network

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Dear Member: In less than two weeks, more than 100 NFFN members, advocates and supporters of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) will come to Washington to lobby the Congress for increased funding for the federally funded energy assistance program.

For the fourth straight year, the NFFN is coordinating this major grassroots lobbying effort as part of its annual Washington Action Day for LIHEAP on February 1st. "Obtaining an effective level of funding for energy assistance is of vital importance during this heating season," said Carol Clements, NFFN's board chair.

"We have the opportunity to urge Congress to provide additional funds for LIHEAP for this winter as well as increasing the funding level of the program for the next fiscal year. I strongly urge anyone who can come to Washington to join us. I also urge those who cannot make the trip to Washington to call or write their Congressional delegation and ask them to support legislation increasing funds for LIHEAP."

The Senate is expected to consider legislation providing an additional \$2 billion in funds for the program for this winter. "We will use Action Day to make the members of Congress aware of how important those additional funds are and how desperately they are needed," said NFFN's executive director George Coling.

State Government Actions

- Missouri Governor Matt Blunt has signed legislation providing \$6.1 million in state funds for energy assistance to low-income and elderly residents of the state. The funds will go to the state's Utilicare program, which was established in 1979 and has not been funded since 2001. The program will distribute the funds after the state's federal energy assistance funds have been exhausted.
- The Arkansas Public Service Commission has expanded its winter utility cut-off rules to establish a moratorium for cut-offs of gas service that runs from November 1 to March 31. Under the provisions of the previous winter cut-off rule, utilities were barred from disconnecting service on days when the temperature was at or below freezing.

The expanded ruling, which applies to gas utilities only, bars cut-offs for customers who are elderly, handicapped or eligible for LIHEAP, food stamps, WIC or Medicaid. It is believed that Arkansas is the first southern state to bar wintertime cut-offs.

- In Michigan, the Public Service Commission, the state's Community Action Agency Association, and major utilities have launched a program designed to increase home energy conservation. Called "Save Energy with Ease," the program is being funded by DTE Energy, Consumers Energy Company, Indiana Michigan Power Company, and SEMCO Energy Gas Company.

Through this new program, 1,500 low-income residents, already receiving weatherization services from the state government, will have free programmable thermostats installed in their homes. Also, 3,450 residents will have the opportunity to attend a two-hour energy conservation workshop and receive a free home energy conservation kit.

- Washington Governor Christine Gregoire has signed legislation allocating \$7.6 million in emergency aid to help low-income households with their energy bills. According to the governor's office, the funds will provide grants to 14,000 households this winter.

The funds will come from a fine paid by Qwest Communications to the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission.

- Maine Governor John Baldacci has reached an agreement to purchase 8 million gallons of heating oil from Venezuela at the current market rate and Venezuela has agreed to give the state a rebate on the purchase equal to a 40 percent discount. At the current market price of \$1.74 per gallon for heating oil, the rebate would be about \$5.57 million.

In addition, Citco, a Houston based subsidiary of Venezuela's state owned oil company, will donate 120,000 gallons of heating oil to 40 homeless shelters across Maine.

Utility Actions

- The Pacific Gas and Electric Company has increased from \$200 to \$300 the amount of the assistance grants available to customers through the Relief for Assistance through Community Help (REACH) program. The grants provide assistance to customers who experience a sudden and unplanned change in their ability to pay their energy bills.

PG&E has donated \$250,000 to the REACH program and will match dollar for dollar customer and employee contributions. PG&E has set a goal of doubling the funds available through the REACH program from \$1.5 million to \$3 million.

- Customers of Central Hudson Gas & Electric, who receive federal energy assistance grants this winter, will also get a one-time \$200 bill credit due to an initiative approved by the state Public Service Commission. The utility proposed the initiative to the Commission as a way to provide additional and immediate assistance to eligible low-income customers.

The program is funded from \$1.3 million in unspent funds that were collected for the Powerful Opportunities Program, a program set up to help customers avoid losing service due to non-payment.

- Indiana Michigan Power has contributed \$100,000 to provide energy assistance to its customers in Michigan and Indiana through a new program called Energy Share, which will be administered by the Salvation Army. In March, the utility will begin seeking customer contributions to the fund in March.
- Cleco Power has donated \$200,000 to a group of 16 community service agencies within the utility's Louisiana service area to provide financial assistance to help customers pay their electric bills.

Cleco Power president Dilek Samil said, "Many of our customers are struggling right now. Due to hurricane expenses and higher prices for energy and other necessities, they are facing financial difficulties. We hope this donation will assist those customers with the greatest need."

Business Community Actions

- Two New York banks have launched programs to help customers deal with this winter's high home energy costs.

Citizens Bank is offering \$1,000 to \$3,000 loans at one percent interest and loans up to \$10,000 at up to 3 percent interest to low- and moderate-income families who want to weatherize their homes. The loans are available through March 31 and are designed for families making less than \$51,680 in the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area or \$42,080 in the Glens Falls region.

Trustco Bank, through its charitable foundation, formed the Winter Warmth Fund and recently announced that it had awarded \$250 grants to 70 individuals and families. The program is funded through donations from employees and customers. Trustco is also located in upstate New York.

Annual Conference

- Jason DeParle, author of *American Dream*, a book that follows the lives of three women as they make the transition from welfare to work, has accepted the NFFN's invitation to be the luncheon speaker at this year's annual conference.

More information on Mr. DeParle, a New York Times reporter, and *American Dream*, may be found at www.jasondeparle.com.

The NFFN's 22nd annual conference will be held at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC on June 11th and 12th.