

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP): A Safety Net that Saves Lives

[Print in PDF](#) 

The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides life-saving assistance for low-income households with young children, frail elderly, and individuals with disabilities, by helping to pay electricity, gas, and oil bills. Payments are generally made to the utility or fuel vendor directly to help ensure that utility service is not terminated and that fuel tanks don't run dry. States and localities that deliver the assistance have leveraged substantial, additional funding from private sector programs and funds to help more families.

Without LIHEAP, households experience disconnection of utility service, leading to lack of heat in the winter or cooling in the summer. This creates dangerous situations, especially for elders and young children. Households sometimes resort to unsafe heating methods resulting in serious property damage and even loss of life. Many more families experience homelessness simply because their houses are not livable. Unaffordable energy bills lead to dire choices. Research has documented that families with young children put less food on the table when they don't get LIHEAP. The lack of adequate nutrition results in underweight babies and school-age children who aren't able to get to school, or under-perform.

A Cost-Effective, Life-Saving Program

In recent years, LIHEAP has helped an estimated 7 million families annually by paying a portion of their heating or cooling bills. And yet the program is chronically underfunded: currently only 20 percent of eligible households receive assistance. Every year, LIHEAP provides grants to each state and territory. These governmental grantees have broad discretion in how they structure their energy assistance program. States have flexibility in setting the income-eligibility criteria and benefit amounts to target assistance so that the most vulnerable receive the most help. LIHEAP is a targeted energy assistance program that has enjoyed strong bipartisan support over its 35 years of existence.

The federal government has imposed much stricter reporting requirements on the state LIHEAP programs. In response, states have demonstrated that LIHEAP is an effective program for reducing "energy burdens" - a key program measure showing the percent of out-of-pocket household income needed to pay energy bills. As LIHEAP help is provided to a vulnerable household, it makes energy bills more affordable. This means that households can avoid having the heating oil or propane tank run dry in the middle of a frigid winter or a shut-off of electricity in the middle of a sweltering summer. LIHEAP therefore frees up limited household income that can be spent on food, rent, or prescription medicine.

National studies have documented the dire choices low-income households face when energy bills are unaffordable. Because adequate heating and cooling are tied to the habitability of the home, low-income families will go to great lengths to pay their energy bills. Low-income households faced with unaffordable energy bills cut back on life-sustaining necessities, including food, medicine and medical care.

Low-income households experience very low food security during heating and cooling seasons when energy bills are high. A pediatric study in Boston documented an increase in the number of extremely low weight children, age 6 to 24 months, in the three months following the coldest months, when compared to the rest of the year. Clearly, families are going without food during the winter to pay their heating bills, and their children fail to thrive and grow. A Colorado study found that the second leading cause of homelessness for families with children is the inability to pay for home energy.

When people are unable to afford paying their home energy bills, dangerous and even fatal results occur. In the winter, families resort to using unsafe heating sources, such as space heaters, ovens and burners, all of which are fire hazards. Space heaters pose 3 to 4 times more risk for fire and 18 to 25 times more risk for death than central heating.

In the summer, the inability to keep the home cool can be lethal. Older adults, young children, and persons with chronic medical conditions are particularly susceptible to heat-related illness and are at a high risk of heat-related death. Air conditioning is the number one protective factor against heat-related illness and death, especially in the South and Southwest. LIHEAP assistance helps these vulnerable people keep their homes at safe temperatures during the winter and summer. Simply put, LIHEAP saves lives.

For more information, contact National Consumer Law Center attorney Olivia Wein (owein(at)nclc.org).