

CAMPAIGN FOR HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE

Cold Congress in a Hot Time

By Eric Klinenberg and Michael Bracy

As the lethal heat of summer fades into September, the poor and elderly across the country are breathing a sigh of relief. In the coldest states, though, this seasonal change serves as a reminder that an uncertain winter, characterized by record-high energy prices and stratospheric heating bills, lies ahead.

Last week, Congress returned to Washington to complete this session's work. Elected officials now have an opportunity to perform one of their most important and effective functions – Congressional oversight and leadership.

When the nation is faced with a calamity, whether natural or man-made, Congress has an obligation to study the problem, isolate whether specific policies could have avoided or lessened the crisis, then implement those policies. This basic template is a core function of Congress, a function they sometimes perform very well.

This August, communities from California to Illinois and New York faced a crisis that had both natural and man-made elements: record-breaking heat waves that endangered millions of our country's most vulnerable residents.

Unfortunately, we've been here before. In 1995, hot weather and a failure to provide adequate support for social programs established to help those most in need combined to kill 739 Chicago residents during one catastrophic week. Studies demonstrated that these deaths were caused by a wide range of economic and sociological factors, including the isolation of poor elderly residents who were unable to pay their cooling bills.

The fallout from this summer's crises was strikingly similar to the Chicago disaster, yet on a national level. There are a number of local and national programs that could help reduce the death toll in future heat waves – and more are certainly on the way. But there is one way that Congress could take concrete action to save lives in both extreme summer and winter weather: Fully fund the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

LIHEAP is a highly efficient federal block grant program that states administer to the most desperately poor residents. These small grants help residents pay their heating bills in the winter and cooling bills in the summer – assistance that is particularly critical in times when extremely high energy prices or weather emergencies wreak havoc with household budgets.

Like all federal programs, Congress establishes an amount of money that could be set aside each fiscal year to fund the program; in LIHEAP's case, it is authorized at \$5.1 billion. Every year, Congress then goes

through the appropriations process to determine how much money will actually be spent on this program. For years, Congress has funded LIHEAP at a level well below the \$5.1 figure; last year's appropriation was \$2.1 billion.

This spring, in response to soaring energy prices and a crushing need for assistance, Congress decided to allocate an additional \$1 billion to the program, providing additional assistance to well over 100,000 poor households. This brought the overall LIHEAP investment up to \$3.1 billion, still \$2 billion short of the authorized amount.

Now, with energy prices still through the roof, another deadly summer on the books, and a winter freeze just months away, Congressional appropriators are intent on reducing the overall LIHEAP investment back down to the \$2.1 billion figure.

Finding the additional three billion dollars to fully fund the LIHEAP program would increase the percentage of eligible households receiving heating and cooling assistance from the low teens to the high twenties – still leaving over three quarters of the eligible households without assistance.

Congressional leaders are right – to provide an adequate level of funding to serve the overwhelming majority of eligible households who currently do not receive LIHEAP assistance would take an Act of Congress. However, it would only take the will of appropriators and Congressional leaders to fund the program at the full \$5.1 billion level they have currently budgeted.

Given a spirit of accountability, it seems particularly unconscionable that Congress would ignore the one basic short-term action they could take to address what has become an everyday energy crisis for the nation's poorest households. For millions of Americans, assistance from LIHEAP could prevent a tragic choice between heating and eating this winter, and it could be the difference between life and death when next summer arrives.

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