

High Oil Prices Mean Suffering For Maine Poor

Written by Jennifer Osborn



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ELLSWORTH — Maine's poor may suffer the most this coming heating season as oil prices skyrocket and funding for heating assistance programs remains the flat.

"Families will be cold this winter," said Tim King, executive director of Washington Hancock Community Agency. "Families will be driven into poverty. And some people will die."

"Something needs to be done at the federal and state level to address what I see as a catastrophic crisis this coming winter," King said. (Related story, Page 1)

WHCA held a luncheon Friday to thank organizations it partnered with to provide heating assistance last winter. The organizations included Maine Sea Coast Mission Society, the Salvation Army, the Emmaus Center and the Ellsworth Ecumenical Council.

"We're already thinking about next winter, believe it or not," said King. WHCA has been getting calls already from people who don't know how they're going to get by on \$5 a gallon heating oil, he said.

King said next winter will be a challenge, not just for poor families but for families with moderate incomes.

Families with moderate incomes "fall through the cracks," King said.

WHCA administers the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program or LIHEAP.

The disparity between the benefit and the amount of oil it purchases continues to grow, the organization stated.

The average LIHEAP benefit the past winter was \$750, which bought 250 gallons of fuel at \$3 a gallon.

Filling a 275-gallon tank will cost \$1,279 at \$4.65 a gallon, said Eleanor West, who is the community services division director and administers the heating assistance program. "We just don't know how folks are going to do it this year."

WHCA started a community fund called The Heating and Warmth Fund or THAW to help those who are just outside of the eligibility requirements for LIHEAP or who have exhausted all other options to heat their homes.

One such client was an elderly man living in a mobile home. His oil company would not deliver oil because of safety issues with his furnace. The THAW fund bought a new furnace for the man, West said.

The THAW fund also helped a mother who lived in one room of a house with her three children last year with an electric space heater to stay warm.

"These are monies that we wouldn't have without the THAW fund because it just isn't out there," she said.

WHCA said the president's proposal for Federal FY 2009 is to cut LIHEAP funding by 22 percent. He has also proposed zero funding for the Weatherization Assistance program.

WHCA took 5,324 applications for help and was able to give aid to 4,666 households. The remaining 636 were denied.

Of the homes that WHCA assisted, 40 percent were homes of elderly and 25 percent are disabled. This past year, those households spent close to 30 percent of their household income on fuel costs.

WHCA had leaders of its weatherization program give a presentation on insulation.

Allan Slater, WHCA's energy conservation manager, said the savings from insulating a house can be significant.

For example, Slater said he went from using 3,000 gallons of heating oil a year to 800 gallons a year after spending \$1,000 to insulate his house.