

## More energy assistance sought

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SPRINGFIELD – As high heating bills continue to roll in, state and federal officials seek more money for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

LIHEAP helps struggling families pay their heating bills by making payments to utility companies on their behalf, helping to reconnect heat that has been cut off, and in some cases, supplementing rent when heat is included in that payment.

On Thursday, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said he planned to push for an extra \$2 billion in emergency LIHEAP funds when the Senate reconvenes, and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., has agreed to allow a vote on the bill.

That \$2 billion would be in addition to the \$2.16 billion the federal government has already allocated for LIHEAP for the budget year that began on Oct. 1, 2005.

"At a time when heating bills are soaring and the number of LIHEAP applicants is rising, Congress needs to help struggling families through the winter," Durbin said in a written release.

Illinois has about \$150 million in state and federal funds available for LIHEAP this winter, but the money is running out fast and there are still families who need help.

According to the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the state already pledged or spent nearly \$111 million on LIHEAP between Sept. 1, 2005 and Jan. 4, 2006. That was enough to help 232,255 households. At about this time last year, the number of households receiving assistance was 176,000, the department reported. By the end of last winter, about 310,000 households received grants.

Thursday night, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced it was releasing an additional \$6.6 million to Illinois for energy help, part of \$100 million in contingency funds it was releasing nationwide.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich and 28 other governors have signed a letter urging Congress to boost LIHEAP funding. But state Rep. Bill Black, R-Danville, said he is hoping the state can kick some more money into the program as well.

"We're just into winter, we've got to have more LIHEAP money," Black said. "It would be great if the feds would release more money, they may, they may not, but even if they do, we still need to supplement LIHEAP with some of our state dollars because of the extreme high price of natural gas. I've had people bring in heating bills of \$485."

Black has also filed legislation, HB4328, to waive the state sales tax on natural gas and propane for the three months beginning Feb. 1, but it is unclear whether the measure will be assigned to a committee when the General Assembly reconvenes next week. The waiver would cost the state about \$70 million, but could provide some much-needed relief, Black said.

"We have not had the chance to review Rep. Black's proposal," said Lena Parsons, spokeswoman for the Governor's Office of Management and Budget. "But, as with all legislation that has a fiscal impact, we will of course take a look at it."

Parsons said a supplemental appropriation bill to put more state money into LIHEAP had not been ruled out, but had not been ruled in, either.

To qualify for LIHEAP, household income must be at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. For a single person, the income limit is \$1,196 a month, while a two-person household can make as much as \$1,604 per month and still qualify. A family of four can earn up to \$2,420 a month.

In Champaign County, The Urban League of Champaign County administers the program, while Embarras River Basin Agency handles applications from Coles, Douglas and Edgar counties. Ford, Iroquois and Vermilion County residents can apply at the East Central Illinois Community Action Agency, and Central Illinois Economic Development Corporation handles DeWitt and Piatt counties.

For more information, contact your local LIHEAP agency, visit [www.liheapillinois.com](http://www.liheapillinois.com) or call the LIHEAP hot line at (800) 252-8643.

For more tips about keeping warm this winter, visit [www.keepwarm.illinois.gov](http://www.keepwarm.illinois.gov) or call (877) 411-WARM.