

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

www.suntimes.com

[Back to regular view](#)

<http://www.suntimes.com/output/business/cst-fin-heat25.html>

[Print this page](#)

Energy boost for poor

March 25, 2006

BY MARY WISNIEWSKI Business Reporter

Low-income Illinois residents who need help paying their heating bills will receive almost \$74 million in additional money this year-- a 45 percent increase over current funding.

"It will make a huge difference," said John Colgan, vice president for public policy for the Illinois Community Action Association. "There are a number of people out there who still need help who haven't been able to get help. People who've already been helped will be able to be helped a little bit more."

The funds for Illinois are part of \$1 billion in additional assistance Congress secured this month for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, known as LIHEAP. The total national funding for the program is now \$3.16 billion for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, 2005.

Advocates for the poor say LIHEAP funding has long been inadequate. The federal appropriation has stayed around \$2 billion a year since 1981, despite steep increases in natural gas prices.

Before it received the new funding, Illinois had about \$163.8 million in combined state and federal LIHEAP money for the year. The state already has spent \$151.3 million, providing grants to 307,000 households. About \$12.5 million is left, and about 50,000 applications are still being processed, according to Kathleen Strand, a spokeswoman for the governor's office.

One concern is that the new allocation does not include money for administrative costs, Colgan said.

The new funding comes right before April 1, when utilities can shut off power for nonpayment. Last spring, up to 70,000 Peoples Energy customers were eligible for disconnection, according to spokesman Rod Sierra. He said some of the LIHEAP money could be used for emergency grants to help people in danger of being disconnected.

Sierra said the state also may give people who already have received LIHEAP grants an extra benefit.

Those eligible for LIHEAP help can make up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level, which works out to about \$2,420 a month for a family of four.

Heating costs from November through February were 28 percent higher than the same period last year, Sierra said. To find out about LIHEAP funding, call 1-877-411-WARM or see www.keepwarm.illinois.gov.

mwisniewski@suntimes.com

Copyright © The Sun-Times Company

All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.