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Editorial: Heating costs leave us cold

A report analyzing the impact rising home heating costs will have on Massachusetts residents is alarming – but won't be a surprise to residents who opened their heating and electricity bills this month.

The report, prepared by U.S. Rep. Martin Meehan, D-5th, shows Massachusetts residents will pay \$1.6 billion more to heat their home this winter than they did four years ago -- an increase of \$754 per family.

The average cost to heat a home will be \$1,309 (gas); \$1,487 (oil) and \$1,779 (propane). In four years, natural gas prices have risen 105 percent, eight times faster than the rate of inflation; heating oil costs have risen 115 percent, and propane gas prices have risen 71 percent.

Yet federal funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) was cut by \$200 million.

That means, according to Meehan's report, that 530,000 low-income residents in Massachusetts who qualify for energy assistance will not receive the help they need. "Cutting LIHEAP funding is unconscionable. It will literally leave thousands of Massachusetts' neediest families out in the cold this winter. ... We must not forget that heat is not a luxury – it is a necessity," he said.

Attempts by Democrats in Congress to increase LIHEAP funding was defeated, and it is expected that many states - Massachusetts among them - will exhaust available funding before winter's end.

The failure of Congress to increase heating assistance leaves many individuals on their own, but there is still some help available, if you know where to look and what to do.

Massachusetts utilities offer an "Energy Bucks" program, which helps eligible families save up to 30 percent on their utility bills. Some 800,000 families are eligible for the program, but less than a third taking advantage of it.

Action Inc. offers fuel assistance programs as well. An Action advocate will be at Ipswich Town Hall on Tuesday afternoons from 1-4 to help with energy aid as well as other anti-poverty programs. For information, call 978-283-7974, ext. 102.

All of us should be aggressive about saving energy, as well, by shutting off the lights when we leave the room, weatherproofing and insulating where it is needed, and using energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances.

And hoping for a mild winter and early start to spring wouldn't hurt, either.