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## Harkin renews call for more low-income heating help

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HIAWATHA, Iowa - Sen. Tom Harkin warned of the "cascading" effects of higher home heating costs and said Friday he will renew his fight to include more energy assistance for low-income Iowans in hurricane relief bills awaiting congressional approval.

The Iowa Democrat hosted a roundtable discussion in Hiawatha on the importance of the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the program that helps low-income families, the disabled, and senior citizens living on fixed incomes pay high home energy bills.

Harkin heard that in the first two weeks of sign-up for energy assistance, HACAP (Hawkeye Area Community Action Program), which serves counties in Eastern Iowa, has seen a 50 percent to 70 percent increase in applications. At the current rate, HACAP CEO Don Mannicia said, assistance is likely to run out in mid-January, "just when it gets really cold."

If that happens, Harkin said, "then other things cascade. Kids get sick. Maybe people cut down on the amount of food they're eating or the drugs they're supposed to take so they can pay for heating bills."

Higher costs for heating oil and natural gas should be considered part of the emergency created by Hurricane Katrina, Harkin told about 25 people, including HACAP staff, who attended the meeting.

In the Midwest, 80 percent of homes are heated by natural gas, according to Harkin. Those costs are expected to increase by nearly 50 percent this winter.

Despite that, the Bush administration has approved reduced funding for community action agencies, such as HACAP, which administer LIHEAP, by 50 percent, Harkin said.

He was unsuccessful earlier this month in winning passage of an amendment that would have provided \$3.1 billion in emergency LIHEAP funding. He'll try again when Congress takes up an emergency funding bill to deal with Katrina.

"With the huge increases in heating costs, this has got to be looked upon as part of the Katrina emergency," Harkin said.

Otherwise, he said, "if we want to put the money in to pay for higher energy bills for the low-income

and the elderly, well then we have to cut money some place else, like Medicaid, food stamps or something.

"Well, we didn't do that for Katrina and this is a part of the emergency, so we shouldn't have to cut other programs to pay for this either," Harkin insisted.

Harkin is collecting examples of the impact of higher heating costs to share with colleagues when he argues for emergency funding.

"With the week off, senators and congressmen have been back in their states and districts and I think they're hearing the same thing I'm hearing here, so maybe we'll have some support for getting it passed," Harkin said.