



November 6, 2005

Energy assistance funding still uncertain

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Even as winter approaches, it's still unclear how much federal money will be available to help low-income people pay soaring energy bills.

"The question remains as to what we're ultimately going to end up with," David Fox, executive director of the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance in Washington, D.C., said Friday.

The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, known in Wyoming by the acronym LIEAP, provides heating assistance for people based on income, household size and fuel type.

In light of higher energy prices, program supporters in Congress have been trying to increase funding. Under the Energy Policy Act passed earlier this year, the program was authorized to receive \$5.1 billion, but appropriations passed so far don't come near that level.

Fox said the House passed a Labor, Health and Human Services appropriations bill in June that provided \$2.006 billion for the state block grant program. Last week, the Senate version of the bill provided a total of \$2.183 billion.

In the meantime, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved its portion of a

budget reconciliation bill that provided an additional \$1 billion for fiscal year 2006 only.

"That had the endorsement of the chairman of the committee, Joe Barton, which is a very encouraging sign," Fox said.

Last year, the state block grant program received \$1.885 billion. "That's where we are right now, pending final resolution," he said.

Fox said he hopes Congress will fund the program up to its authorized spending level, but added, "I long ago gave up handicapping what members of Congress are going to do."

Fox noted there is always the possibility of supplemental funding, and he expects to see efforts to increase money for low-income energy assistance to be included in additional hurricane recovery bills.

At the state level, Gov. Dave Freudenthal has said he favors exempting utility bills from the state sales tax, providing weatherization assistance through low- or no-interest loans and putting more money into LIEAP.

Republican state legislators also are working on a program to help low-income residents with energy bills. According to one estimate, 50,000 people in Wyoming live in households eligible for the LIEAP program.