

# The Patriot-News

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## State to Seek Help for Poor

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Breaking with long-standing state policy, Gov. Ed Rendell said yesterday he will seek a \$15 million appropriation from the Legislature to supplement federal heating assistance for low-income residents this winter.

The governor, appearing at successive news conferences in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and Philadelphia, said his new Stay Warm PA program is a critical necessity to help the state's poorest residents get through a winter of high-priced fuel and frigid temperatures.

"We're taking action now to make sure our neediest citizens can meet their winter heating bills this year," he said. "We're committed to protecting our most vulnerable and providing the help they need."

Rendell said the state expects to receive about \$120 million in federal funds, but needs \$75 million more to meet anticipated demand this winter. He seemed confident that Congress would add \$1.2 billion in funding nationwide, and that would provide the additional money the state needs. If additional federal money is not provided, he promised to "go back to the Legislature" for more state money.

Senate Majority Leader David "Chip" Brightbill, R-Lebanon, would like to hear more about Rendell's plan to distribute the \$15 million, but is interested in working with the governor, said Erik Arneson, Brightbill's chief of staff.

"I don't think it will be partisan in any way," Arneson said.

State policy since the Ridge administration has been that heating assistance is a federal responsibility. Pennsylvania now joins about 26 other states in providing a direct state supplement.

Other key provisions of Stay Warm PA are as follows:

- Rendell will ask utilities in the state to agree to change some of the most-criticized provisions of the Chapter 14 law that establishes guidelines for utilities in shutting off service to customers who don't pay their bills. The law was approved by the Legislature last November.

- Utilities will be asked to double enrollment in their community assistance programs, which provide cut-rate electric and gas service to people with incomes less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level. State Public Utility Commission statistics show that many people who qualify for the programs don't sign up. A two-week state sales tax holiday will be held for purchases of energy-efficient appliances and weatherization materials, including energy-efficient windows. No dates were announced. Six regional heating summits will be held around the state on Nov. 1 to hear comments from the public on what is most needed to help people weatherize their homes and pay utility bills. The Lowe's home-improvement chain will offer free seminars on home weatherization and donate weatherization supplies to help senior citizens and low-income families.

Rendell said if utilities do not agree to changes in the Chapter 14 law, the PUC should implement those changes.

Rendell said he wants delinquent utility customers to again have a right to have the PUC negotiate one payment arrangement with utilities for them. Chapter 14 has been interpreted as barring PUC involvement if there was a prior payment arrangement. This is in the works at the PUC.

He also wants reconnection fees limited to \$50 for people whose gas or electric service has been shut off, and security deposits for service restoration limited to \$100. Chapter 14 allowed the utilities, in effect, to demand hundreds of dollars to restore service.

Scott Surgeoner, a spokesman for the FirstEnergy Corp. electric companies in the state — Met-Ed, Penelec and Penn Power — said the company will go along with whatever is decided.

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*Staff writer Charles Thompson contributed to this report.*