

Poor may face cold winter with cut in assistance plan

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The government's heating assistance for low-income families may be lower than last year's funding levels, causing major concern by mayors nationwide.

The United States Conference of Mayors published a statement by executive director Tom Cochran regarding the U.S. Senate's rejection this month of additional funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

"The Senate's actions are completely senseless and unconscionable, given that home heating costs are expected to increase by as much as 50 percent this winter, on top of this year's record level gas prices," Cochran said in his statement.

"Experts say that this winter could be the most expensive winter heating season in the nation's history," he said. "Increased funding for this essential program is needed now more than ever."

Mayors urged Congress to fund the energy assistance program at its authorizing level of \$5.1 billion, which the Bush administration recommended in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 but only funded to the tune of \$2 billion. That's actually less than the 2005 appropriations of \$2.18 billion.

Both the House and the Senate versions of the appropriations bill for 2006 restore some of the 2005 funding levels, but state officials believe it is a little too early to know exact funding for this year.

Tennessee receives approximately \$24 million each year, Department of Human Services spokeswoman Michelle Mowery Johnson said.

"These funds are allocated to 19 agencies across the state," Mowery Johnson said. "In some years, Congress will appropriate a supplemental award around mid-January, which we put out as a contract amendment as quickly as we can so the agencies can serve persons already on their waiting lists who they couldn't serve in the first round due to a lack of funding."

However, Mowery Johnson said, only about 75 percent of the people who apply each year are served.

"With the projected increase in heating costs this winter, we are anticipating that the requests for assistance will increase this year with people needing help who have never had to apply before," she said.

Through the entire process state officials are staying in close contact with their liaison at the federal energy office.

So far, Mowery Johnson said, the state has been told that federal funds will continue at last year's level at least to the end of this year.

The national Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, a coalition of nonprofit and for-profit groups, also urged Congress to fully fund the program at \$5.2 billion, especially in light of the U.S. Energy Information Administration's predictions "that Americans will pay an average of 48 percent more for natural gas this winter, 32 percent more for fuel oil and 30 percent more for propane."