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\$10 million program to help pay for heat

State, utilities working on plan that includes weatherproofing steps

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) – North Carolina will work with utilities on a nearly \$10 million plan to help the poor and elderly pay for their heating bills this winter and make their homes more energy efficient.

North Carolina will spend \$6.5 million; power companies will chip in \$3.4 million for the program announced yesterday by Gov. Mike Easley. The money should serve about 70,000 families, his office said.

Natural-gas prices have increased more than 50 percent, and prices for heating oil and propane have jumped by more than 30 percent over last year's prices, according to Easley's office. That will probably add \$300 to \$400 to utility costs for the average home this heating season.

Most governors already have asked Congress to spend an additional \$1.3 billion this winter to pay home-heating costs for low-income residents and families displaced by the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes.

"The unusually high fuel prices this year highlight the need for a national energy solution," Easley said in a statement. "I have joined with other governors to urge Washington to act, but in the meantime, we are going to do what we can to help our most vulnerable citizens stay warm this winter."

The plan puts \$3.1 million in the state program that makes houses more energy efficient and is expected to cut program's waiting list in half. Making a home weatherproof typically includes installing insulation, closing leaks that let in outside air and repairing heating units. About 3,500 families usually benefit from the program annually.

The rest of the money will go to a crisis-intervention program administered by the Division of Social Services that provides up to \$300 in energy assistance to low-income families.

Participating utilities are Duke Energy, Progress Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas, PSNC Energy, North Carolina Power and Electricities.