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Seniors need heating help, senator pleads

Schumer pays a visit in New Brighton, calls for an additional \$3B in home-heating aid

By BEN EBEN NEWHOUSE

Lena Garzetta of New Brighton is among the many Staten Island seniors who may be frozen out this winter by skyrocketing home-heating costs, according to Sen. Charles Schumer.

Speaking in Ms. Garzetta's living room yesterday, Schumer (D-N.Y.) said Congress could stave off the chill by adding \$3.1 billion to the Low Income Heating Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which doles out money to help households pay their energy bills.

"There wasn't enough money to cover everyone eligible last year, and it will be even harder to do so with increasing prices of heating oil and natural gas," Schumer said. "More people than ever are likely to qualify for LIHEAP assistance, and we need to make sure the money will be there for them."

Citing federal estimates, Schumer said Staten Islanders will pay \$466 more to heat their homes this winter, on average, with the 126,000 natural-gas users paying about \$1,638 – up from \$1,170 last year – and the 21,000 home-heating-oil customers burning \$1,885 – up from \$1,429.

More than 431,000 New Yorkers received grants from LIHEAP last year, as

did 390,000 upstaters, according to Office of Temporary Disability Assistance figures.

A program participant since her husband died eight years ago, Ms. Garzetta, 88, said the \$250 she received for her gas bill this year was "not a big deal but better than nothing."

Were the program fully funded, Schumer said, Ms. Garzetta and the 21,000 other eligible Islanders could receive grants for up to 30 percent of their total costs, or about \$500.

Additional funding for LIHEAP has passed the Senate with bipartisan support, but Schumer anticipates that House members hailing from warmer climes will resist the change.

Rep. Vito Fossella (R-Staten Island/Brooklyn) recently voted in favor of two pieces of legislation increasing LIHEAP funding by a total of \$3 billion, according to spokesman Craig Donner.

Schumer also called on Congress to give another \$500 million to the Weatherization Assistance Program, which helps homeowners conserve energy, and urged President Bush to help flatten oil prices by tapping a portion of the Northeast Heating Oil Reserve.