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Vilsack wants state to help poor deflect high heating costs

By Todd Dorman

DES MOINES — With temperatures plunging and Congress frozen in gridlock, Gov. Tom Vilsack said Tuesday that state government may step in to help low-income Iowans pay high heating bills.

State money would be used to bolster the federally funded Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP. Skyrocketing home heating costs are expected to push the program to its financial breaking point this winter.

So far, Congress has promised status-quo funding for LIHEAP, or about \$2.1 billion, despite rising natural gas and propane prices. A bill that would provide an additional \$1 billion remains stalled amid wrangling over budget issues.

Iowa gets a \$35 million slice of the national LIHEAP pie, enough to provide help to 88,678 households last winter. State officials insist that's not nearly enough to meet the demand for assistance this season — especially if a recent round of frigid temperatures signals the start of a harsher-than-normal winter.

"It looks like it's going to be a long-hard winter," Vilsack said on a day when the mercury struggled to get out of the single digits across Iowa. "And if it is, I

think we need to step up to the plate and provide resources and make sure people aren't left out in the cold — literally."

He said Iowa's LIHEAP could receive as much as \$10 million from \$153 million made available when the state recently refinanced its share of a legal settlement with tobacco companies. But Vilsack would not commit to a precise dollar figure Tuesday.

"Whatever the number is we ought to be thinking about it," Vilsack said.

Iowa House Speaker Christopher Rants, R-Sioux City, said state help is possible. But he said a \$10 million request could be a tough sell.

"It's a discussion we'd be prepared to have," he said.

For now, Iowa and other cold-weather states are keeping an eye on Congress. It's still possible the U.S. House and Senate will vote to increase heating assistance before they go home for the holidays next week.

"There's certainly some interest in addressing that issue," said Kim Deti, spokeswoman for the U.S. House Budget Committee. The panel is chaired by U.S. Rep. Jim Nussle, R-Iowa, who is seeking his party's gubernatorial nomination.