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Some may face choice: Whether to heat or eat

By Richard Wolf, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration has denied requests from five states to increase food stamps for low-income families facing higher heating bills this winter. Maine, New York, Kansas, Virginia and South Carolina sought to raise monthly food stamp allotments by projecting what families will pay to heat their homes. The increases would have ranged from \$8 to about \$30 a month for families who pay their own utility bills.

State officials and advocates for the poor said the decision will make it hard for needy families to afford both heat and food. The Energy Department has forecast 25% average increases in heating bills this winter. Research shows that when utility bills rise, some poor families reduce food purchases.

Robert Greenstein, director of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said federal food stamp law says benefits should reflect current costs. "It's effectively cheating low-income families," he said. If the five states' requests had been approved, many others would have followed, he said.

The Agriculture Department, which runs the food stamp program, said the best solution to rising utility bills is an increase not in food stamps, but in the low-income heating assistance program. The administration supports a \$1 billion increase, pending in Congress. Advocates for the poor say as much as \$4 billion is needed.

Jean Daniel, director of public affairs for the Agriculture Department's Food and Nutrition Service, said states can seek an increase in food stamps if they document higher utility bills. That way, she said, the government can "make sure

that each individual is getting the right benefit amount ... not too little, not too much."

The federal food stamp program helps 25.7 million Americans pay for food by giving them an average of \$92.70 in purchasing power each month. To be eligible, family income generally must be below 130% of the federal poverty level, or about \$25,100 for a family of four.

At least two states — Maine and New York — said they would appeal the decisions.

Barbara Van Burgel, acting director of Maine's Office of Integrated Access and Support, said families are expected to spend about \$200 more this winter to heat their homes. "They'll use that cash for heating, and they will have less food on the table," she said.

Russell Sykes, deputy commissioner of New York's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, said the decision "forces some difficult circumstances on people who have marginal incomes."

Duke Storen, director of benefit programs in Virginia, said rising heating bills represent "just as big a crisis for low-income and vulnerable households this winter" as Hurricane Katrina was for Gulf Coast residents.

James Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, said the decision "will force people to choose between heat, medicine and food. ... We know that people will eat less. ... It will have particularly damaging effects on kids, especially poor kids."

But Daniel said actual figures, not projections, are required. "We also have a responsibility to the taxpayers," she said.