



Extra Federal Energy Assistance Helps Stave off Immediate Crisis

SENATOR JOHN F. KERRY

MORE MONEY FROM WASHINGTON AND LOWER OIL PRICES AVERT CATASTROPHE FOR THE BAY STATE'S POORER HOUSEHOLDS BUT A LONG-TERM SOLUTION REQUIRES LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIES TO REDUCE DEMAND.

“A snowy Katrina” is how I described the potential public health disaster likely to befall the more than 163,000 low- to moderate-income Massachusetts households facing the prospect of record-high home heating oil prices this winter. I made that warning on June 25th during a Congressional hearing on the impact of rising fuel prices on small businesses. It was 87°F in Washington. Every UMass cam-

pus enjoyed temperatures in the 80s. But despite the sunshine, the only thing on the minds of thousands of people in Massachusetts was the winter ahead and the very real risk of not being able to heat their homes.

Thankfully, the price of crude oil has fallen significantly since the record-high prices of the spring and summer of 2008. However, while the drop in oil prices is a

welcome relief for some in Massachusetts, the continuing economic crisis has erased many homeowners' financial flexibility and again left many Bay State residents struggling to heat their homes.

While our current economic crisis can be accurately described as a "once in a century" event, the "snowy Katrina" heating oil crisis is one which arises every winter and as such, demands both immediate, short-term responses and long-term solutions.


The primary federal energy assistance program for low-income households is the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). As energy costs rise, the demand for LIHEAP funds grows. In 2008, 5.8 million American families received LIHEAP funds, the highest participation level in 16 years. In Massachusetts, more than 145,000 families receive LIHEAP funds. However, as energy costs rise and demand for LIHEAP grows, the program's budget has not kept pace and we are now struggling to cover all the people who need help.

Senator Kennedy and I, in coordination with our colleagues in the House, have worked aggressively to address the immediate, short-term situation of our heating oil crisis by providing additional funding for the LIHEAP program. Despite having to wage frequent battle with the Bush Administration, I am pleased we were able to secure \$126.5 million in LIHEAP funding for Massachusetts residents in 2008. We have already secured \$213 million in LIHEAP funding for FY 2009, having successfully doubled federal LIHEAP funding over Republican objections to \$5 billion.

We must always ensure there is an adequately funded federal heating oil safety net for low- to moderate-income Massachusetts residents but habitually increasing LIHEAP funding and enrolling more and more people into the program is not a long-term solution to ending the yearly threat of a "snowy Katrina." And such an approach certainly won't end the extreme fluctuations in oil prices that resulted in many consumers "locking" into onerous contracts with oil companies prior to the recent price drop.

The solution to Massachusetts' home heating oil crisis requires the efforts of both statesmen and citizens. Long-term, America must secure its energy independence by reducing our dependence on foreign oil, investing in renewable and clean energy technology, and ensuring consumers have access to more affordable "green" energy and environmentally friendly products. As the incoming Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I plan to play a leading role in a new era of American "environmental diplomacy" abroad while pushing for a larger investment in and stronger commitment to our renewable energy sector here at home.

At the same time, it is essential that those who can afford to invest in more energy-efficient products and business practices do just that in order to cut down on Massachusetts' overall heating oil usage. Making America more energy-efficient is too massive a job to be left to just politicians; higher-income homeowners, business leaders, real estate developers, and college administrators must help to lead this effort. The greater market demand for weatherization products, the more affordable and accessible weatherization products will become, enabling low- to moderate-income earners to make the necessary investment in products and technologies that will lower their home heating bill.

No one should ever go cold in Massachusetts. Sadly, that's not the situation today. But continuing to throw money at the problem is not a solution. In order to keep everyone in Massachusetts safe, healthy, and warm, no matter the weather outside, we must end our addiction to oil from around the globe and begin investing in relatively inexpensive energy-efficient techniques and products here at home. 

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