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Additional LIHEAP funding urged for struggling families as Senate considers more COVID-19 relief

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Advocates are urging a new round of funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) as summer heats up and the debate over the next economic stimulus spending plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic moves to the U.S. Senate.

Proponents of the LIHEAP program laid their cards on the table in May by stating that the program that assists families with energy costs should be extended not only for the current fiscal year but into the future as the nation digs itself out of the sudden economic downturn caused by the pandemic.

“Every effort must be made to ensure that universal access to and affordability of utility services are not diminished during this public health and economic crisis,” the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA) said in a resolution passed by its members on May 12.



The resolution also proposed expanding LIHEAP eligibility for consumers and also urged Congress to “consider providing direct support to utilities to assist consumers that may not otherwise qualify for LIHEAP assistance, including providing direct funding to utilities to reduce consumer arrearages and provide bill credits to help consumers maintain service.”

The Democrat-led House of Representatives this month passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, a sprawling \$3 trillion measure that contains an additional \$1.5 billion for LIHEAP, but which is being given an initial chilly reception from the Republican-controlled Senate.

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Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has stated his intention to seek changes to the measure while Trump administration officials have signaled willingness to put things on a slower track to see how the effects of the previous stimulus package shake out. The Senate, which will reconvene in Washington on June 1 following a 10-day recess, has not yet set a date to begin its debate.

Proponents of LIHEAP are accustomed to seeing the program regularly gain and lose funding and then get it back during the budgetary horse-trading process on the Hill, and there have been no warnings from lawmakers that the \$1.5 billion in the HEROES Act is being targeted. Moreover, the cash-flow for LIHEAP was improved in early May by the release of \$900 million in additional funding from Congress under the CARES Act, which was quickly passed in March.

At the same time, however, LIHEAP advocates had stated that around \$4.3 billion of funding was needed to shield struggling consumers from a flood of unpaid energy bills that will otherwise have to be sorted out in the months ahead. “While these funds will begin to address the crises that many low-income families are facing, the need for LIHEAP has grown exponentially since the CARES Act was passed,” the National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA) said in a May 8 statement. “While utility shutoff moratoria have allowed households to keep their heat and air conditioning on during the crisis, the bills will come due once the moratorium ends. NEADA recently estimated that LIHEAP needs an additional \$4.3 billion to reach about 11.2 million households.”

Officials say that \$4.3 billion in additional relief could be apportioned in the following way: 50 percent of the funding would help newly laid-off workers; 25 percent would help low-income families who were already struggling and for whom the pandemic will only make things worse; and 25 percent would go towards the purchase of air conditioning units for the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions who are required to shelter-in-place.

“As the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, it is disproportionately affecting low-wage workers and our nation’s seniors,” noted a recent op-ed from Karen Harbert, president and CEO of the American Gas Association, in collaboration with Katrina Metzler, executive director of the National Energy and Utility Affordability Coalition, and NEADA Executive Director Mark Wolfe.

The natural gas “industry is intent on helping to ensure that families do not have to choose between paying their energy bills and affording other necessities like food and medicine,” the op-ed said.

The HEROES Act could create a surge of new LIHEAP enrollees since it would modify eligibility requirements to allow anyone who has been unemployed since the end of February to obtain benefits without requiring them to meet the income requirements that they would in an ordinary year.

The possibility of the Senate slow-walking the HEROES Act into the summer also puts pressure on LIHEAP’s role in keeping Americans cool as the temperature climbs. The pandemic has raised the likelihood that the usual respites from summer heat waves – cooling centers, retail locations, and public buildings – won’t be available due to closures and social-distancing requirements. The National Energy and Utility Affordability Coalition (NEUAC) had urged making LIHEAP funding available for the purchase of air conditioners for residences, and the Centers for Disease Control formally urged cities to consider LIHEAP as a means to minimize the use of public cooling centers by allowing hard-pressed residents to stay home without fear of running up higher electric bills.

Lawmakers, meanwhile, will have a lot to sort through as they parse the HEROES Act and it will be up to them to decide whether LIHEAP will get another needed boost.

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