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Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-VT)

Demanding Release of Emergency Heating Funds

Today, we are announcing the sending of a letter to President Clinton demanding the release of the LIHEAP Emergency Heating Reserve Fund. This letter has 140 House Members on it - Democrats, Republicans and the House's only Independent. It is a true non-partisan effort and I thank all the Members who signed the letter, and those who are here today, for their support.

It has been chilly in Washington, D.C. this week, but it has been a heck of a lot colder in Vermont, Massachusetts, in New Hampshire, in Maine, in Montana and in dozens of other states around the country. In fact, the Associated Press reported that the cold snap last weekend took 12 lives, as below zero weather swept the country.

As the House and Senate continue to disagree over the Labor-HHS budget, as Democrats and Republicans disagree over the budget, as the President and the Congress disagree over the budget - millions of low income Americans, including many senior citizens find themselves unable to adequately heat their homes because LIHEAP, the fuel assistance program, is now providing only a fraction of the funds to the states that it previously did.

Last year, an estimated 6.1 million households received LIHEAP low-income heating funds. Three quarters of those households had incomes of less than \$8,000 per year. Today, because of lack of funds only a fraction of those people are being helped today.

In Vermont, the small amount of LIHEAP funds, about one-sixth of what we received last year at this time, have been able to help only families with dire, life-threatening emergencies. Community action groups throughout the state, the Governor's Hot Line and my District Office have received many calls from people who are either out of fuel or for whom the crisis is imminent. Local religious and volunteer groups have been asked to help, but despite their best efforts, these groups cannot possibly make up more than a tiny part of the loss of LIHEAP funding.

Regardless of when and to what degree Congress finally settles funding for the LIHEAP program, low-income families in our states can no longer wait for heating fuel. They need help, and they need help right now. If ever there was an emergency situation, this is it!

There is \$300 million dollars in an Emergency Contingency Fund that the President has the authority to use in "unusual energy emergencies...." What we are doing today is asking the President to recognize the very serious emergency which exists for millions of low-income Americans in cold weather states and to release those funds now. In America, children and elderly people should not be freezing in their homes. We can do better than that.