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## **New Independent Study Reveals Six Million Low-Income American Households Need More Help to Pay Utility Bills**

*Over a third went without food for at least a day to pay them*

One third of low-income American households who received federal help last year to pay utility bills received shut-off notices that caused many families to go without food or medicines to pay them, and 15 percent had their heat and light shut off before receiving grants from the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), according to an independent survey. It was commissioned by the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association (NEADA), which represents state organizations that manage dissemination of LIHEAP funds.

LIHEAP grants, derived from a division of the U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS), help poor households pay part of their energy bill, and for home weatherization, delivered fuel, and repairs to heaters and boilers. The survey, *2018 National Energy Assistance Survey, Final Report* completed in December asked recent LIHEAP recipients in seven states selected for national representation how they fared prior to receiving LIHEAP grants. Of 634 respondents:

- 37 percent had closed off part of their home to save utility costs
- 25 percent kept the temperature inside unsafe or unhealthy though more than half of LIHEAP households have a senior over 60, or young children
- 52 percent of households have a disabled member, many of whom rely on electricity for breathing machines or to refrigerate medicines
- 17 percent had to move in with friends or family and 6 percent went into shelters.

The poor are hit hard by energy bills, which take about 12 percent out of a low-income paycheck, but only 2.7 percent from households with higher wages. In winter the heating bill can cost a low-income family 25 percent of its income. Only 26 percent of LIHEAP respondents reported being unemployed part of a year, yet to try to meet their utility costs:

- 36 percent went without food for at least a day
- 41 percent went without medical or dental care

- 31 percent did not fill a prescription or took less than a prescribed dose to stretch it.

“The federal LIHEAP budget has suffered increasing erosion over the last decade from a high of \$5.1 billion in 2010 to \$3.7 billion this year for all states, territories, and tribes,” says Mark Wolfe, executive director of NEADA. “That sounds like a large number until you see that we helped a million and a half more people in 2010 than we do now, despite increasing need.”

The NEADA survey, <http://neada.org/program-policy-reports/liheapsurvey/> underlines the agonizing choices faced by low-income households that struggle to pay their utility bills. In 2015 the U.S. Energy Administration reported that nearly one third of *all* American households struggle to pay energy bills, with 25 million foregoing food and medicine to pay for utilities, and 7 million households facing that decision every month.

“This new study documents what those on the front lines have been hearing from low-income households prior to receiving LIHEAP grants,” says Katrina Metzler, Executive Director of the National Energy and Utility Affordability Coalition (NEUAC). “As we face climate changes like the recent frigid polar vortex that plummeted some State temperatures below those in Siberia, having the heat stay on is critical. The President’s 2020 LIHEAP budget must be increased to meet continuing, overwhelming need.”

“NEADA’s survey helps energy providers across the country better understand the struggle of vulnerable households,” says Dan Alderson, Manager of Customer Advocacy for Atmos Energy Corporation that provides natural gas in nine States. “For our part, we will use this information to revise programs and develop new ones that can relieve the energy burden on poor families, seniors, and disabled.”

“The NEADA survey demonstrates the importance of LIHEAP in helping some of the nation’s poorest families afford the cost of home energy,” agrees John Harvanko, Director of the Office of Energy Assistance Programs in the Minnesota Department of Commerce. “Federal funding for LIHEAP is at a lower level than it was in 2010 though the need is far greater. Too many families still face anguished choices between having heat, or food and medicines. This program is a critical safety net for our most vulnerable citizens.” #####