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Record Number of Households Receive Cooling Assistance

Federal Funding Needs to be Increased to Address Cooling Needs for Poor Families

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Record Numbers of Families Receive Cooling Assistance: The National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA), representing the state directors of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), today reported the program is projected to help 1.2 million poor households pay their cooling bills this summer, up 46% percent from last year. This breaks the record for the most families that LIHEAP has helped annually with cooling assistance in the program's 40 year history. The program also helps about 4.9 million poor families pay their heating bills during the winter months.

Adapting to Climate Change: The need for home cooling is increasing as summer temperatures continue to rise as a result of climate change. While the changing climate affects everyone, it hits particularly hard in low-income communities. Close to one out of five poor families do not even have access to air conditioning as compared to 11.6% of the rest of the population.

Families Struggle to Pay their Home Energy Bills: Even when they have access to air conditioning, struggling households often will not turn it on if they know they will not be able to pay the bill at the end of the month. The Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey estimated that 35.4 million households (18.5%) kept their home at a temperature that felt unsafe or unhealthy, at least one month in the last year. In the summer, that puts them at risk for heat-related health impacts such as heat stroke and can even lead to death.

When the temperature gets unbearable, other necessities suffer. The Pulse Survey also estimated that 56.3 million households, or almost a third of American households (29.4%), reduced or forwent expenses for basic household necessities such as medicine or food, in order to pay an energy bill in the last year.

Addressing the Need for Cooling Assistance: States are concerned with making sure struggling families have access to air-conditioning equipment and the funds needed to operate the equipment as rising temperatures put low income families at risk of heat exposure. NEADA is beginning a national project to support providing high efficiency air conditioners to low income families and additional energy assistance to help cover their cost of operations.

According to Mark Wolfe, Executive Director of NEADA, *as a result of rising temperatures due to climate change, air conditioning is no longer a luxury that only the well-off can afford. It is now as important for low income families, especially the elderly and disabled who are at greatest risk of heat related illnesses. This is a problem that can be addresses through LIHEAP – provided Congress appropriates sufficient funds.*

LIHEAP is Severely Underfunded: Federal funding for LIHEAP is only sufficient to reach one out of six eligible families and covers about 50% of home heating costs. It is not sufficient to also cover a similar percentage of cooling costs or the costs of providing air conditioning equipment for families who do not currently have access to cooling.

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