

CAMPAIGN FOR HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE

December 19, 2007

LIHEAP---Senate-December 18, 2007

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me begin by thanking my good friend, the distinguished chairman of the Appropriations Committee, for yielding.

The reason I rise is to deal with a very important issue that impacts millions of our fellow Americans, and that is all over this country, with the price of home heating oil soaring, people are wondering about how they are going to stay warm this winter. My very fervent hope is that the Congress, both the Senate and the House, will address this issue before we adjourn for the Christmas holidays.

I commend Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Senator Byrd, Chairman Harkin, and others for, in fact, adding a significant sum of money--over \$400 million--to the Omnibus appropriations bill. This is important, and I appreciate that. I think people all over this country appreciate that.

Unfortunately, however, this total of \$2.6 billion in funding for LIHEAP, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, that so many people, so many elderly people depend upon in order to stay warm in the wintertime, while it is an 18-percent increase from last year, it is still 23 percent below what was provided for LIHEAP just 2 years ago in nominal dollars. Meanwhile, as everybody knows, the cost of home heating fuels has soared. Compared to 2 years ago, heating oil prices are projected to be 50 percent higher this winter. The price of propane will be 38 percent higher, and electricity prices will be 14 percent higher.

These high prices, coupled with the reduction in LIHEAP assistance compared to 2 years ago, mean States will be forced to either reduce the number of people who will be receiving LIHEAP or else to significantly cut back on the amount of money that people will be receiving. There is no question about what will happen if that occurs: People in the United States of America will be cold. It is possible that some may actually be freezing.

Two years ago, thanks to the leadership of Senator Snowe and many other Senators, LIHEAP funding was increased by \$1 billion above the appropriated level because it was then the belief that we faced a home heating emergency. Well, if we faced a home heating emergency at that point, let me tell my colleagues we face one today that is even more severe. In the State of

Vermont and all over this country, we are having elderly people living on fixed incomes who are looking at the soaring prices of home heating fuels. They are scared to death. It seems to me that we have the moral responsibility as the Senate of the United States of America to do something for those people before we adjourn.

I thank my colleague, Senator Leahy from Vermont, as well as Senators **COLEMAN, KLOBUCHAR, SNOWE, OBAMA, DOLE, BAUCUS, SUNUNU, CANTWELL, COLLINS, CASEY, LIEBERMAN, LANDRIEU, KERRY, KENNEDY, and CLINTON** for supporting an amendment that will essentially increase LIHEAP funding by \$800 million, half of which will go into the normal LIHEAP formula, half will go into emergency funding to be used at the discretion of the President.

While those Senators are already onboard, I know there are many other Senators--Republicans, Democrats, and Independents--who are also wanting a vote to show the people back home that we have not forgotten them and that we do not want any Americans to go cold this winter.

Let me simply conclude by suggesting to you that the people of our country all over America are losing faith in the U.S. Government. That is no secret. Polling for the President, polling for Congress is at an almost all-time low. They think we are concerned about a whole lot of issues, but we are not concerned about them. It seems to me that before we go home to our well-heated homes, before we go home to our vacation time, that we not turn our backs on some of those who are most in need. I think we have to act boldly to restore faith in the U.S. Government, and I hope that before we leave, we can get a vote on this floor with bipartisan support, and that we can move this process forward.

Mr. President, with that, I thank my good friend, Senator Byrd, the outstanding leader of our Appropriations Committee, for yielding, and I yield back the remainder of my time.

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I thank the very distinguished Senator for his remarks.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, the Senator from West Virginia has the floor, but would he yield me at least a couple minutes in reference to what my colleague from Vermont just spoke about?

Mr. BYRD. Yes, Mr. President. I am glad to do so.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I thank the distinguished chairman. I agree with what the Senator from Vermont has just said. In our State, cold weather is not a rarity, it is a fact of life, especially this time of the year. The thermometer on my front steps goes down to 20 below zero. Many times there is no mercury showing because it has gone below that.

Now, that is not theoretical cold, that is cold you die from. I know what it has cost us in filling the tank for my own furnace this year, and I wonder how many people who are not privileged to have the kind of salaries all of us do, how they possibly do it. It is not a matter of just help; this is a matter of life or death. It is not a matter of just comfort. We are not talking about the weather being in the fifties and perhaps you can just put on more sweaters or more coats; we are talking about it being 5 or 10 and 15 and 20 degrees below zero, or even today in Burlington, VT, it began at zero. The temperature was at zero, and then it warmed up from last night. In those situations you die if you don't have heat. It is not a question of being comfortable; you die. It is as simple as that. You die. There are a lot of people who cannot afford this.

I will work with the distinguished Senator from Vermont, as I have with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, in trying to get more money after this bill is passed for LIHEAP. I know the distinguished Senator from West Virginia has supported us every single time on LIHEAP. He also knows what it is like in those rural areas of West Virginia where people barely eke out a living and what happens to them when the snow is falling and it is cold outside and the children are crying because they are cold and the parents are doing everything possible to keep them warm. We will work on this.

I thank the Senator from West Virginia for yielding me the time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia is recognized.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate now proceed to the immediate consideration of H.R. 2771, the legislative branch appropriations bill; that the only amendment in order be a substitute amendment at the desk which is cosponsored by Senators **LEAHY, COLEMAN, KLOBUCHAR, SNOWE, OBAMA, DOLE, BAUCUS, SUNUNU, CANTWELL, COLLINS, CASEY, LIEBERMAN, LANDRIEU, KERRY, KENNEDY, and CLINTON**--this amendment provides for \$800 million in additional LIHEAP funding--that there be a time limitation of 30 minutes for debate equally divided in the usual form on the amendment; that upon the use of that time, the amendment be agreed to, the bill be read a third time, and the Senate, without any intervening action or debate, vote on passage of the bill, as amended.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. REID. Reserving the right to object, I say to my friend from Vermont, I support this issue. All you have to do is look in the Washington Post today at their editorial. It says, among other things:

This could be the start of an epic winter. If the past few winters here in the northeast have taught us anything, it is to be prepared to do whatever winter allows at the moment it allows.

We have to be prepared for a cold winter. We have some money in this bill that we hope to pass sometime in the next several hours to take care of some of the needs of the problems relating to the issue of LIHEAP; that is, money for people who are desperately poor and need help to keep their homes warm. That is what this is all about. I have told the Senator from Vermont that I am going to do everything within my power to get this issue before the Senate as soon as possible. Winter is not going to end at Christmastime. Winter is going to be here. We can move to enlarge the funding for this bill. That is a commitment I have. I think with the list of cosponsors he has on this proposed unanimous-consent request, it is something we should be able to get done.

The problem the distinguished Senator finds himself in is, it is late in the year. This is the first year of this session of Congress. There are always a lot of reasons for not doing things this late in the year.

I have admired this fine Member of Congress for many years, being with the people he best represents, people who don't have any representation. I admire what the Senator has done. I hope we can move forward on this now.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. KYL. Mr. President, on behalf of several Republican Senators, I object.

I would also note that I believe there may be one other unanimous-consent request, and I would be happy to suspend while that is made and then conclude my remarks in 3 minutes. I think the Senator from Rhode Island would like to speak, or I can go ahead and conclude, and then the Senator from Ohio could make his request--whatever the pleasure of the leader is.

Mr. REID. Has there been objection?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Mr. REID. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll. The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I rise to discuss the funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. This pro-

gram is absolutely vital to the people of my State. This winter we have seen record-high prices for home heating oil.

I want to thank the appropriators for including additional funding for the LIHEAP program as part of the omnibus spending bill, but, Mr. President, I was hoping we would proceed to consideration of the amendment offered by the Senator from Vermont, of which I am proud to be a cosponsor, which would have provided 800 million additional dollars for the LIHEAP program.

Mr. President, this is a real crisis. I consider the amount of money in this bill to be a significant step forward, but it is not adequate to meet the overwhelming needs for the constituents that live in cold weather States and are struggling and literally choosing between paying their bills, buying food, purchasing prescription drugs, and staying warm. That is a choice that no family in this country should have to make.

I am pleased with this downpayment on the LIHEAP program. It is a major step forward that is going to make a significant difference, but, frankly, it is simply not adequate to meet the overwhelming need.

Nationwide, over the last 4 years, the number of households receiving LIHEAP assistance increased by 26 percent from 4.6 million to about 5.8 million, but during this same period, Federal funding increased by only 10 percent. The result is that the average grant declined from \$349 to \$305. In addition, since August, crude oil prices quickly rose from around \$60 barrel to nearly \$100 per barrel, so a grant buys less fuel today than it would have just 4 months ago. According to the Maine Office of Energy Independence and Security, the average price of heating oil in our State is \$3.26 a gallon. That is a record in our State.

This large, rapid increase, combined with less LIHEAP funding available per family, imposes hardship on people who use home heating oil to heat their homes. Low-income families and senior citizen living on limited incomes in Maine and many other States face a crisis in staying warm this winter.

The Sanders amendment would have provided an additional \$800 million as emergency funding for LIHEAP. The term "emergency," could not be more accurate. Our Nation is in a heating emergency this winter. Families are being forced to choose among paying for food, housing, prescription drugs and heat. No family should be forced to suffer through a severe winter without adequate heat.

I understand we may consider this proposal again after the holidays. When we reconsider it, I urge all my colleagues to support the Sanders proposal to provide vital home energy assistance for the most vulnerable of our citizens.