

Examiner (Independence, MO)

09/02/2017

"John Hickey guest column: Stand up to save utility assistance program"

Audience: 5,219

Source Website: www.examiner.net

John Hickey guest column: Stand up to save utility assistance program

Saturday

Sep 2, 2017 at 12:26 AM

When I was young and broke in the early 1980s, I had a hard time keeping up with my utility bills. Rather than experiencing a winter of frosty nights and freezing pipes, I was supported by an important federal program, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which literally helped me keep the heat on in my home.

LIHEAP still helps struggling families, pay their utility bills when their energy is shut off or is threatened to be cut off. In the winter, eligible candidates for this program (for example, a family of four earning less than \$32,805) can request a one-time payment of up to \$800 to help cover fuel costs. In the summer, the maximum one-time amount is \$300. According to the Missouri Community Action Network, more than 178,000 Missouri households rely on LIHEAP support each year.

Today, some 35 years after I needed the help of LIHEAP, I serve as the Missouri director of the Sierra Club and have the opportunity to give back by advocating for others who use this program in their own times of need.

The president's proposed 2018 budget zeroes out funding for this invaluable assistance initiative. What's more, the same budget proposal would eliminate funding for weatherization assistance, a program that ensures that LIHEAP dollars are used effectively.

Weatherization ensures that the poorest among us have adequate insulation and functioning HVAC equipment; this way, our tax dollars aren't being used to subsidize an inefficient or leaky home. Furthermore, improved home efficiency reduces future energy bills so that low-income individuals are less dependent on programs like LIHEAP to help cover utility payments in the future. According to a 2013 Missouri Department of Economic Development report, weatherization saved Missouri recipients an average of \$437 in annual heating and cooling costs per household.

These two programs not only help those struggling in poverty to have the dignity of a heated home, weatherization means cleaner air, too. When people are using less gas and electricity to heat or cool their homes, less carbon pollution is emitted. There's value for both people and the planet in the efficient use of natural resources.

Another valuable aspect of home weatherization funding is that these federal dollars stay in the communities in which they're used. The highest expense in weatherization projects is the labor required to perform tasks that can't be automated or outsourced to China. The money for that labor is spent in the same Missouri communities where it's earned. When workers have more money in their pockets, they have more dollars to spend in their local economies as well.

It may surprise you to learn that the Missouri Sierra Club finds itself in agreement with Missouri electric cooperatives when it comes to LIHEAP.

"Located in the communities they serve, co-ops are acutely aware of LIHEAP's importance for people struggling to pay their energy bills," said National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

CEO Jim Matheson in a statement released earlier this year. "America's electric co-ops serve 93 percent of the nation's persistent poverty counties. On behalf of millions of co-op consumers in need, co-ops urge Congress to provide increased funding for the LIHEAP program."

I couldn't agree more.

This all begs the question: If environmentalists and utility companies can agree that providing heating and cooling assistance for the poor is valuable, who stands to gain from the elimination of funding for LIHEAP and home weatherization programs?

These cuts are being proposed in order to offset tax breaks for the super-rich.

The argument that our nation can't afford to help her poorest citizens cool and heat their homes falls on its face when you see that this budget is being designed to help the wealthiest Americans at the expense of the poorest.

Like most recipients of LIHEAP funds, I only needed this assistance once when I was a young man. For me, it meant I was able to build a life and livelihood even when times were tough. For today's hard-working Missouri families, a few hundred dollars to reduce utility costs or to cover those costs in a pinch can mean the difference between having a job and a home and being left out on the street.

Missourians depend on LIHEAP and weatherization assistance. Do our elected representatives want to help their neediest constituents or would they prefer to further line the pockets of billionaires? The answer should be clear.

a " **John Hickey** is director of the Missouri Chapter of the Sierra Club.

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