

## **Funding for program that assists people with heating homes could be cut in half under Obama budget proposal**

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By **Tarryl Jackson | Jackson Citizen Patriot**

Ronnie Mayo said he would probably freeze to death during the winter months if not for a home heating assistance program distributed through the Community Action Agency. The 56-year-old Parma resident is unemployed and said he receives help through the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program — or LIHEAP — to buy deliverable fuels such as propane to heat his home. “It’s nice to have (the program) here to help out,” Mayo said. “People need the help really bad.”

Mayo and hundreds of other Jackson County residents who struggle to keep their homes warm during the colder months might not get as much help from the government this upcoming winter. Funding for LIHEAP could be slashed in half — from \$5 billion to \$2.5 billion — under President Barack Obama’s 2012 budget proposal.

Michigan’s funding could go from about \$240 million to \$120 million, impacting more than 615,000 low-income household across the state, according to the Coalition to Keep Michigan Warm. “We have a lot of folks who are struggling,” said Whitney Skeans, customer assistance coordinator at Jackson-based Consumers Energy, which is a member of the coalition. “LIHEAP is a crucial bridge to help them through a tough spot and to get them on their feet.”

The Coalition to Keep Michigan Warm is an advocacy group whose mission is to improve access to resources that help low-income households with energy assistance. Last week, Skeans and other coalition members attended LIHEAP Action Day in Washington, D.C. to speak with legislators about the program’s value to those in need. “We want to make sure that our customers remain safe,” Skeans said.

The federal government’s rationale behind cutting funding to LIHEAP is that energy costs are going down, Skeans said. However, that is not the case for low-income and rural residents who rely on deliverable fuels to heat their homes every winter, she said. LIHEAP funding is distributed to each state to assist low-income families with energy costs. In Michigan, the funding is used for state emergency relief, home heating credit and weatherization assistance.

In Jackson County, 850 households received state emergency relief funds in June, with payments averaging about \$306, according to the state Department of Human Services. It is a crisis intervention program and provides payment for heating fuel, electricity, home repairs and more.

Community Action Agency received about \$260,000 in LIHEAP funding this year to provide deliverable fuels such as propane and wood to about 300 clients in Jackson, Lenawee and Hillsdale counties. Payouts can range anywhere from \$200 to \$1,200 per household based on need, said Chris Kilmer, director of community programs at Community Action Agency. "I think the cuts could have a significant impact on the Jackson community," Kilmer said. "People need heat, and people need to stay warm."

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