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WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama's budget proposal unveiled Monday would reduce the current level of funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which helps to heat the homes of thousands of low-income New Hampshire residents.

The proposal sets funding for the program – popularly known as LIHEAP – at \$3 billion for the fiscal year that begins next Oct. 1. In budget documents, the Obama administration stressed that it is asking for \$450 million more than its request for the fiscal year 2012 to "target funds to states with vulnerable households facing high home heating costs for winter 2012-2013."

However, Obama's proposed \$3 billion still falls short of the nearly \$3.5 billion which was eventually approved by Congress for the current 2012 fiscal year.

Legislators from cold weather states are certain to push to increase the president's LIHEAP proposal when the issue is before Congress in the coming months.

Already, Republican Rep. Frank Guinta, R-N.H., expressed concern over the president's proposal, which he said "would cause hardship for thousands of Granite Staters who rely on LIHEAP to keep their homes warm in winter."

Guinta recently joined Rep. Charles Bass, also a Republican, and other House members in sending a letter to the president to ask that funding for LIHEAP at least be maintained at its current level.

"Sadly, that isn't reflected in his new budget proposal," Guinta added.

Bass also expressed similar concern.

"I have serious concerns that his budget request for 2013 will not be enough to help New Hampshire families struggling with high heating costs next winter."

Last month, Sens. Jeanne Shaheen, a Democrat, and Kelly Ayotte, a Republican, also joined 38 other senators in a letter to the president asking that further cuts for the LIHEAP program be avoided.

"While I am still reviewing the full details of the president's budget request, I am concerned that the proposed LIHEAP allocation may not provide sufficient funds for New Hampshire." Ayotte said in a statement. "I will continue my work to responsibly fund LIHEAP and bring greater accountability to the program so that New Hampshire's most vulnerable citizens are not left out in the cold."

Celeste Lovett, fuel assistance program manager at the New Hampshire Office of Energy and

Planning, said that the LIHEAP program helped 45,252 families in the state last winter, as compared to 31,956 families to date this winter.

New Hampshire has received \$14.7 million from the LIHEAP program for the current winter, down from \$34 million a year ago, she said.

According to the national group Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, New Hampshire residents who receive help from the LIHEAP program have incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Joanne Morin, director of the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning, acknowledged that the president's proposed budget at least "recognized New England's vulnerability because of dependence on heating oil."

"We anticipate it will be tight this year, but we're going to have to wait to see the exact effect – although we do believe we will serve those with incomes 200 percent below the poverty line," she said

Brandon Avila, a spokesman for the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, said that although the Obama administration acknowledged that energy costs are rising, his group is "still disappointed that the administration hasn't taken into consideration the growing number of households eligible for assistance."

The most recent available estimate by the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance indicates that 134,200 New Hampshire households were eligible for LIHEAP assistance in 2010.

Avila warned that the program will need at least \$4.7 billion in funding to function effectively. That is the level at which Congress funded LIHEAP in fiscal year 2011 – about \$1.2 billion more than the nearly \$3.5 billion being provided nationwide this year, and \$1.7 billion above what was proposed by Obama on Monday.

"Anything lower and there's a real concern that a lot of families could be turned away," Avila said of the \$4.7 billion figure.