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While funding to assist low-income Granite Staters to heat their homes this winter is expected to stay the same, those in need are being encouraged to apply sooner than later.

"Now is the time to apply for fuel assistance if you think you might have a hard time paying your energy bills," said Celeste Lovett, fuel assistance program manager at the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning. "Let the states worry about funding; it's important to be in the database."

New Hampshire's LIHEAP funding level is "expected to be the same as last year," providing the state with \$26 million, said Lovett.

As one of its last actions before going home to campaign prior to the November election, Congress – in a stopgap measure known as a continuing resolution – included a provision that maintains LIHEAP funding at current levels.

According to the Washington-based Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, LIHEAP provided assistance last year to approximately 47,000 New Hampshire homes. The program subsidizes energy costs for families with incomes at 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level.

The continuing resolution covers the first half of the 2013 fiscal year – which began Monday – and provides \$3.47 billion to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, widely referred to as LIHEAP. This is the same amount that Congress approved for the 2012 fiscal year that ended Sunday, Sept. 30.

Lovett said that the \$26 million provided during the 2012 fiscal year – which covered last winter – was enough "to provide some benefits to the people who needed it."

But she noted that LIHEAP was not extended to as many families as in prior years, when national LIHEAP funding reached as high as \$5.1 billion.

However, Lovett said that funding concerns should not stop families from applying for LIHEAP aid.

Louise Bergeron, energy director at Southern New Hampshire Services – one of the state's half-dozen local community action agencies – said that although there was ultimately enough funding to serve the base population in Hillsborough and Rockingham counties last year, the beginning of the winter was "very harrowing."

While the funding level approved by Congress last year was higher than what President Obama had initially requested, it nevertheless dropped to \$3.47 billion in Fiscal 2012 from \$4.7 billion in Fiscal 2011. This forced some fuel assistance applicants to be put on a wait list, Bergeron said.

Bergeron said last year's mild winter helped families through the early part of the season. Looking ahead to the coming winter, she noted that language in the new continuing resolution guarantees all funding will be available as of Dec. 1.

"Benefit levels have not changed so if a family's income has not changed they will receive the same benefit (as last year)," Bergeron said. "But benefits buy less and less product. A harsh winter will force many families to use up their benefits much sooner."

Similar concerns prompted Sens. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., and Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H. – along with Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe, both R-Maine – to sign on to a letter last March urging President Obama to provide LIHEAP funding "at no less" than the \$4.7 billion approved in fiscal year 2011. The letter said any less than that level "presents a real challenge for low income households" and has a "devastating impact ... on seniors and low-income families."

Obama's proposed budget for this year requested just over \$3 billion for LIHEAP, or about half a billion less than the amount contained in the continuing resolution.

Meanwhile, just before Congress recessed last month, U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass, R-N.H., co-sponsored legislation intended to fund LIHEAP at its Fiscal 2010 level of \$5.1 billion, about one-third more than is provided in the continuing resolution.

The legislation is sponsored by 24 House members from New York and New England, five of whom – including Bass and fellow New Hampshire Rep. Frank Guinta – are Republicans.

"Winter is soon approaching and the time is now to ensure there is sufficient funding to help struggling families pay their high heating bills this year," Bass said in a statement.

Alluding to the lower funding levels sought by Obama, Bass added: "With LIHEAP funding subjected to continuous severe cuts by this administration, I hope Congress can find a solution that ensures enough resources to help families while at the same time meeting our priorities in a fiscally responsible manner."

Congress first provided energy cost assistance for low-income families in 1977. At present, the LIHEAP program is administered at the federal level by the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, and is distributed to states based on a formula that, among other things, factors in energy consumption and temperature variation.