

Home Heating Update

Pennsylvanians are enjoying a mild winter, thus reducing consumption of home heating fuels. But the lower demand has not brought price relief; most utilities continue to charge the high prices they set last fall.

The General Assembly has delivered some good news in the form of an Emergency Energy Assistance Fund. This legislation, backed by Rep. Camille "Bud" George and Sen. Jake Corman, provided up to \$21.3 million to low-income households. This was shortly followed by \$13 million in additional federal funding for LIHEAP. As a result of these two sources of extra funding, Governor Rendell expanded LIHEAP eligibility from 135 to 150 percent of poverty. For information on help with heating bills, call Stay Warm PA at 1-866-550-4355 or visit www.staywarmpa.com.

Meanwhile, a special report commissioned by Rep. Dwight Evans has concluded that legislation passed by the General Assembly last year has done much harm to Pennsylvania's system of providing public utilities. The report, authored by Joseph Rhodes, Jr., concludes the new legislation (Act 201) has given utilities "a big stick" with which to threaten consumers who have fallen behind in their payments.

As a result, around 75,000 customers have paid their arrearages in full. But this has come at great cost, according to Rhodes, with most being forced to reduce expenses for household necessities as a result. Moreover, the number of households in shut-off status has jumped from 17,000 last winter to 21,000 this winter, an increase of 24 percent. In many of these 21,000 cases the utility company accepted LIHEAP funds but then did not restore service.