

# Heat and Eat:

## Using Federal Nutrition Programs to Cushion the Shock of Skyrocketing Heating Bills

November 2005

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**Heat and Eat**  
**Using Federal Nutrition Programs**  
**to Cushion the Shock of Skyrocketing Heating Bills**

“We’re frightened about the winter.”

“We’re going to have thousands of people without heat this year.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do to keep people from freezing this winter.”  
(Kentucky and Indiana social service workers and advocates quoted in the Louisville  
Courier-Journal.)

“This is a life or death matter.” (Jerry McKim, chief, Iowa Bureau of Energy  
Assistance, quoted by Associated Press.)

**I. Introduction – The Depths of the Heating Cost Crisis and the Impact on Low-Income Families.**

Even before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast in late August, home heating costs had been rising dramatically. In the two years from winter 2002-2003 (October through March) to winter 2004-2005, home heating costs jumped 36 percent.<sup>1</sup> Now, post-Katrina, the U.S. Department of Energy predicts even more dramatic increases this winter on top of last year’s jumps: estimates are that families will pay 41 percent more than last winter for natural gas, 27 percent more for fuel oil, and 21 percent more for propane.<sup>2</sup> More than half of all U.S. households heat with natural gas.

Large jumps in heating bills affect low-income households with stunning force, because low-income families have no room in their budget to absorb the extra cost. They typically already have to spend every penny on rent, food, utilities, child care, transportation to work (itself subject to skyrocketing gasoline prices), health costs and other essentials. Often they are behind on rent, are behind on utility or credit card bills, are doubled up in housing, owe money to relatives, rely on emergency food providers, or have had to take other special measures. A large jump in one expense category can be catastrophic.

Some costs are unavoidable. Rent has to be paid or the family will be evicted. Child care and car bills have to be paid or jobs will be lost. Two costs that can be squeezed more are food and heat. But the consequences of doing so can be horrendous as heating costs compete directly with food for families’ scarce and fixed dollars in winter.

Research shows that as low-income families’ heating costs go up, they are often forced to choose between heating or eating.<sup>3</sup> Both poor and non-poor families spend more on

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<sup>1</sup> Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, “Why It’s Important to Support LIHEAP,” 2005.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, “Short-Term Energy Outlook,” November 8, 2005.

<sup>3</sup>“ Last month, the National Energy Assistance Directors Association published its look at how low-income households cope with high fuel bills. Nearly a quarter of them failed to make a rent or mortgage payment, a

heating fuel when the weather turns cold, but poor families then tend to spend less on food to compensate, and eat less as a result, while better-off families, even while paying rising fuel bills, spend more on food when it gets colder.<sup>4</sup>

Children in low-income families consume fewer calories in winter.<sup>5</sup> They are at greater nutritional risk in the winter and early spring, when utility costs are higher.<sup>6</sup> According to hunger experts Deborah Frank and John Cook, the adequacy of low-income children's meals deteriorates as the monthly heating bills pile up. After the family has spent its money on rent and utilities, children "go hungry or fill their stomachs with nutrient-deficient fillers such as diluted juice, oatmeal made with only water or inexpensive high-fat sweetened foods."<sup>7</sup>

For low-income households with elderly persons, seasonal patterns in the prevalence of hunger are significant, as households shift expenditures away from food to meet high winter heating costs or high summer cooling costs.<sup>8</sup>

For low-income families, wages and other supports create no breathing room in their budgets. The national minimum wage is \$5.15/hour -- \$10,712/year if a parent works 40 hours/week for 52 weeks. This is way below what a family needs to get by. For a family of three, the 2005 federal poverty line is \$16,090 per year. Thirty-seven million people live on incomes below the poverty line - - 15.6 million of them on incomes below one half the poverty line. Recently USDA reported that 38 million Americans live in food insecure households, meaning they don't have the resources to purchase an adequate diet.

\$16,090 works out to \$1,341 per month. Last year, according to Energy Department figures, if a family used natural gas it paid \$124/month (from October through March) for home heating costs. That's 9.2 percent of a poverty line income – and it's 13.9 percent of a full-time minimum wage job income.

This winter, the monthly gas heating bill will jump another 41 percent to \$173/month – 12.9 percent of the poverty line, and 19.4 percent of the income from the minimum wage job. Families relying on heating oil will be hit hard too. Their heating costs will jump 27 percent over last winter, from \$200 per month to \$254, or 18.3 percent of the monthly

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third skipped medical treatment and 20 percent went without food for at least a day. That was at last year's prices." See "Don't do it," Editorial, Concord Monitor, 10/6/05, posted at <http://www.cmonitor.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051006/REPOSITORY/510060328/1027/OPINION01>

<sup>4</sup> Bhattacharya, J., T. DeLeire, S. Haider, and J. Currie, "Heat or Eat? Cold-Weather Shocks and Nutrition in Poor American Families," *American Journal of Public Health*, V. 93, No. 7: July 2003.

<sup>5</sup> C-SNAP, "Heat or Eat: Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and Nutritional Risk Among Children < 3," 5-5-2003.

<sup>6</sup> C-SNAP, "Seasonal variation in weight-for-age in a pediatric emergency room," *Public Health Rep.* July-August 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, John T. and Deborah A. Frank, "Hunger filled with dire consequences," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 21, 2004

<sup>8</sup> Nord, M. "Keeping Warm, Keeping Cool, Keeping Food on the Table: Seasonal Food Insecurity and Costs of Heating and Cooling," *Economic Research Service*, July, 2003.

income of a family of three at the poverty line and nearly 28.4 percent of the minimum wage.

The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides low-income families with help in paying heating bills, but it only assists 18 percent of all eligible families.<sup>9</sup> The large majority of needy families receive no LIHEAP help, and that too directly affects children's diets. According to the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, "if LIHEAP were funded sufficiently to reach all eligible families, the number of underweight young children" in this country could be reduced by 37,000.<sup>10</sup>

For FY 2005 the government appropriated \$2.18 billion to help families pay utility bills. The President proposed \$2 billion for 2006. That was before fuel costs spiked, but the Administration has continued to oppose an increase in LIHEAP throughout the fall. On November 14th House and Senate conferees agreed to a \$2 billion appropriation in regular LIHEAP state funding and \$183 million in contingency funds that can be released at the president's discretion. They rejected a \$2 billion LIHEAP increase on a party-line vote.<sup>11</sup> Even if there were a LIHEAP increase, it would only offset some of the damage. It would not fix the large new hole being blown in the budget of tens of millions of low-income Americans. Indeed, the executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association says that just this year's increase in heating bills "wipes out" the average LIHEAP grant. "The alternative is you don't buy medicine or you don't buy food."<sup>12</sup>

## **II. The Nutrition Programs Can Help Offset Some of the Energy Cost Increases.**

This analysis sets out some strategies to use the federal nutrition programs to help mitigate the damage of skyrocketing heating costs. These programs are not the solution to the problem. LIHEAP needs a big increase. Higher family incomes that can meet basic needs are the real solution. But the federal nutrition programs can help, for several reasons:

- Most of the nutrition programs (e.g., food stamps, school lunch and breakfast, afterschool food, child care food) are entitlement programs. Participation can rise even without further Congressional action, as more eligible but not yet participating families are brought in by advocates, state and local agencies, schools and service providers.

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<sup>9</sup> Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, "Why It's Important to Support LIHEAP," 1-17-05.

<sup>10</sup> C-SNAP, "The Safety Net in Action: Protecting the Health and Nutrition of Young American Children," July 2004.

<sup>11</sup> There also is, as of November 16th, \$1 billion in additional LIHEAP funding in the House version of the budget reconciliation bill. That bill may or may not pass the House; if it does pass, the LIHEAP provision may or may not survive conference with the Senate; and the budget bill as a whole cuts \$50 billion in domestic spending, primarily in programs for low-income families. The bill thus harms poor families many times more than the LIHEAP provision helps them.

<sup>12</sup> "Heating bill hikes might outpace help," Sioux Falls Argusleader, October 3, 2005.

- When operating well, the programs can react quickly to need, getting benefits to people in a matter of days.
- Increasing participation in these programs often can leverage additional support from state government, utility companies and others who target other assistance.
- All sorts of stakeholders worried about heating costs - - utilities and mayors, advocates and school teachers, state legislators and health providers - - can help families get nutrition benefits to cushion the shock of rising heating costs.

Below we describe five strategies for using the nutrition programs in ways that will help this winter:

1. Quickly enrolling eligible food stamp households that are not participating.

Nationwide about 44 percent of the people eligible for food stamps were not participating in the program in 2003 (the latest available official data). This is about 16 million eligible non-participants. There are many reasons for this - - none of them very good: families may not think that they are eligible; local food stamp offices may make it particularly hard for working families to apply<sup>13</sup>; eligible legal immigrants may be fearful of applying; and many other barriers exist. These barriers are unacceptable at any time, but particularly as costs for basic needs shoot up, it is essential to raise participation rates.

In every state tens or hundreds of thousands of people who should be receiving food stamps are not. This is as true in “cold weather” states where families already face the energy cost crisis as it is in other states.

Governors, state legislators, mayors, utilities, service providers, doctors, hospitals, school principals and teachers, landlords, LIHEAP agencies, food banks, advocates and others worried about low-income families freezing this winter have many options to help, and one is making sure more families apply for food stamps, and doing so now.

Because the Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program (open to all people who meet the eligibility rules, with no waiting lists), it is possible to get people into the program quickly. There are no waiting lists. A state cannot “divert” an applicant family (as it can in TANF) to wait for weeks before applying, or to go through a job search before it gets benefits. And once a household applies, the food stamp office must act on the application within 30 days.<sup>14</sup> Households with very low income and few resources may qualify for “expedited” benefits, in which case food stamps go to qualified households within seven days.

Benefits for eligible, nonparticipating households in 2003 would have averaged about \$55 per person per month. (Non-participants’ potential benefits are estimated to be

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<sup>13</sup> For one example of how dysfunctional local offices can be, see Hungry, Fed Up, San Diegans Have All But Given Up On County’s Food Stamp System, [voiceofsandiego.org](http://www.voiceofsandiego.org), <http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=ehLTJ6MUKVH+b=312470+ct=1519775>

<sup>14</sup> Not all states meet the 30 day standard in most cases. See [www.frac.org/html/federal\\_food\\_programs/programs/FSP\\_timliness.html](http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/FSP_timliness.html). (2003 data.)

somewhat lower than existing participants' average benefits because it is assumed non-participants' incomes are modestly higher - - the very neediest households are more likely to have already applied.) This means that an average family of three starting to receive benefits this coming December would receive by March, 2006 \$660 in food stamps. This allotment is \$341 more than the average LIHEAP grant in 2003 of \$319.<sup>15</sup> This is a huge boost to families struggling to pay heating bills.

How can public officials, advocates and others reach more people quickly this autumn and winter? There are many ways, but here are a few suggestions:

- Outreach. Outreach. Outreach. On radio and TV. In utility bills. At supermarkets. By word of mouth. At LIHEAP application sites. At community group meetings. And in 100 other ways. No political leader, agency official, utility, landlord, community leader, business leader, advocate or other figure should be allowed to bemoan the pain being inflicted by high heating costs or to claim credit for helping solve any part of the problem without being challenged also to describe what s/he is doing to help families get food stamps to assist them in getting through this winter. No low income family should be left unaware of the potential of food stamps to help them in this difficult time. Even a simple act like a letter to the editor can inform families, as was done by a New York food banker: "Residents of the Twin Tiers are bracing themselves for a long cold winter. Heating cost could increase by 50 percent this year, putting a strain on the entire community, especially moderate- to low-income families. This may leave households with less money for necessities like groceries. Food stamps can help people stretch their budgets....By taking advantage of available food stamp benefits, families may not have to make the choice between food and fuel."<sup>16</sup>
- Using enrollment in food stamps to leverage additional heating assistance from government, utility companies, and charitable sources. A number of sources exist to help needy families supplement their heating budgets. Some of these explicitly use food stamp participation as a criterion to expedite targeted distribution.

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<sup>15</sup> National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. "[Purchasing Power of Federal Low Income Energy Grants Continues to Decline, Dropping from 49% of Heating Oil Bills in 2002 to 25% in 2005.](#)" April, 19, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> "Food stamps could ease winter budgets," Letter to Editor by Mary A. Laurey, Nutrition Outreach & Education Coordinator for Food Bank of the Southern Tier, *Star-Gazette*, 10/22/05, posted at <http://www.stargazettenews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051022/OPINION02/510220334>). See also the Leganon Daily News, October 27th ([http://www.ldnews.com/news/ci\\_3157103](http://www.ldnews.com/news/ci_3157103)): in order "to stretch the LIHEAP dollars as far as possible, the county is sending notices to applicants who would also qualify for food stamps and medical assistance but may not be receiving that aid. 'We are really trying to outreach our food stamp and medical assistance to many of these individuals, [county official Joan] Matterness said. 'If we can offer them food stamps and medical assistance they can save money, and in turn use that money for their fuel bills.'"; the Daily Iowegian reported on October 26th ([http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=15455331&BRD=1284&PAG=461&dept\\_id=179799&rfti=6](http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=15455331&BRD=1284&PAG=461&dept_id=179799&rfti=6)) that along with the information on LIHEAP, the assistance office is handing out a brochure on food stamps which details eligibility requirements and answers other questions.)

Accordingly, food stamp outreach not only can get families food dollars to stretch their budgets, but can help leverage faster or additional heating subsidies. Moreover, advocates should review heating funders' criteria and urge them to include food stamp participation, if they do not do so already, as a trigger for eligibility.

- Food stamp offices should be open at hours that let low-income working families apply - - earlier in the morning, and later in the evening, and on weekends. Even if there are increased administrative costs, the investment is worth it. Clearly the families benefit greatly from the food stamp help. But the local economy does so as well - - the USDA Economic Research Service has calculated that every \$1 in added federal food stamp payments generates \$1.84<sup>17</sup> in local economic activity. And the state fiscal situation also can improve - - while benefits are 100 percent federally-funded but administrative costs are shared between USDA and the state, one California study found that the state's increase in sales tax revenue from a food stamp change likely would be greater than the cost of its share of the administrative costs. (While food purchased with food stamps is not taxed, the food stamps free up cash income to pay for other essentials that are taxed.)
- Offices should be encouraged to act as fast as possible (faster than 30 days where possible), and to make families aware of the possibility of expedited benefits.

## 2. Maximize Shelter Deductions, Including the Utility Deduction.

Food stamp benefits for eligible households are higher when the household's countable (net) income is lower. In other words, a family of four with \$1,000/month countable or "net" income gets more food stamps than one with \$1,200 net income. To determine countable income, families with high shelter costs (including utility costs) can deduct some of those costs, so rising shelter costs can be offset in part by higher food stamp benefits.

Shelter costs (e.g., rent, mortgage, property taxes, utilities, fire insurance premiums) that exceed 50 percent of the household's income, after certain other deductions have been taken, can themselves be deducted to arrive at countable income. Unfortunately, such excess shelter expenses can only be deducted up to a cap of \$400 for FY06, unless the household has one or more elderly or disabled persons, in which case this cap on the deduction doesn't apply.

Thus, if a family has income (after taking off such preliminary deductions as work expenses and a standard deduction) of \$1,000/month, and its rent and utilities cost \$600/month, the \$100 "excess" shelter cost (\$600 exceeds \$500 - - which is \$1,000 x

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<sup>17</sup> United States Department of Agriculture – ERS. "Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures Across the U.S. Economy." August 2002.

50% - - by \$100) is deducted. Their countable income then is \$900, and their food stamp benefits increase.

In light of this winter's heating cost crisis, state food stamp agencies should take three steps to assure that households' shelter deductions are as large as possible:

- Make sure that rent costs being figured in each household's case are up-to-date. Recent rent increases (including those made in the last few months as leases were renewed and landlords anticipated higher utility costs) may not yet be reflected. They should be.
  - Make sure that utility costs are fully reflected.
  - Adjust Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs) immediately. The SUA is a fixed amount that the food stamp office uses in figuring the utilities portion of clients' shelter costs instead of using clients' actual utility bills. (If actual bills are higher, the family can document and claim those costs.) State SUAs typically are based on somewhat outdated cost estimates. This winter they should be based on this winter's estimates. Ideally, USDA should provide to the states the federal government's regional projections of energy costs in order to make this adjustment. Alternatively, states should get estimates from local utilities and adjust the SUA amount after USDA approval.<sup>18</sup>
3. Make sure that LIHEAP and other payments helping families with utility costs are not reducing food stamp allotments.

Several forms of assistance that must be or can be used to help families cover heating costs are not countable as income in determining food stamp eligibility or benefits. For example, food stamps can't be reduced when a family gets LIHEAP income. States, other public officials and advocates should make sure that agency policy and practice reflect these rules, both for existing recipients and for new applicants. Moreover, in

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<sup>18</sup> For example, as the energy costs start hitting Maine residents, both charities and the state are preparing responses. "Rick Morrow, food stamp program manager for the state, said as a result of the increased cost for fuel, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services has requested an increase in a household's Full-Standard Utility Allowance, as well as its Non-Heat Utility Allowance. "The budgeting process for determining a household's eligibility amount (for food stamps) is quite complicated, but the costs of utilities can play a major factor in the budget," Morrow said. "(The initiative) would increase the budget so there would be some increase in food stamps for households that don't already meet the maximum (for their household size)," he said. Any state initiative to increase the food stamp program's cost is subject to federal government approval, and Morrow said that hasn't been done yet." ("Don't bank on it," Mechele Cooper, Blethen Newspapers, Morning Sentinel, 11/5/05, posted at <http://kennebecjournal.maintoday.com/news/local/2116564.shtml>).

encouraging states, localities and charities to make such payments that can help with heating costs, advocates and public officials can point out that the badly needed utility help will not lead to reductions in the (100 percent federally funded) food stamp benefits.

Key forms of disregarded income are:

- Federal payments for fuel or energy bills, such as through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (“LIHEAP”). 7 USC § 2014(d)(11)(A); 42 USC § 8624(f).
- Vendor payments paid directly to a utility on a household’s behalf (for example, by a relative, a charity, or another public agency). Thus, if a family has its heat bill paid by another relative, that payment does not reduce its food stamps. 7 CFR § 273.9(c)(1).
- TANF or general relief payments for special or emergency needs not included in normal TANF or general relief checks. 7 CFR § 273.9(c)(1)(i)(F). If this winter a state, because of heating costs or otherwise, makes one-time only or other such TANF payments to help with excessive or unusually high heating costs, it should be non-countable income.
- Money from private charities, if it totals \$300 or less in any three months. 7 CFR § 273.9(c)(12).
- One-time vendor payments or allowances for the cost of weatherization or emergency repair or replacement of a furnace or heating device. 7 USC § 2014(d)(11)(B), 2014(k)(2)(c).

#### 4. Reducing gasoline and public transit costs by reducing unnecessary visits to food stamp offices.

At the same time that families are confronting skyrocketing heating costs, they must cope as well with growing transportation costs for public transportation or automobiles to go to and from work, child care, and public agencies. State and local food stamp administrators can help reduce these costs in several ways.

- **Lengthening Certification Periods:** In the 1990s, out of fear that they were not counting working families’ income accurately, many states started requiring families to reapply for food stamps every three months. This change to shorter certification periods required many more office visits – and unintentionally caused a dramatic decline in food stamp participation, as families, and particularly low-income working families, were unable or unwilling to reapply so often. Under current rules, states can make recertification periods as long as 12 months (24 months for households with elderly or disabled members) . In addition, through the Combined Application Projects (CAP) for seniors and disabled

persons, states can extend recertification periods up to 2 years. Currently, 12 states have Combined Application Projects.

- **Reducing Face-to-Face Interviews:** Under current rules face-to-face meetings between clients and the food stamp office need only occur once a year. Many states require more frequent meetings. Moreover, states must offer telephone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews in hardship situations, which the state may define. States are not taking adequate advantage of this. Working hours that conflict with food stamp office hours are among reasons states should offer telephone interviews. The additional expense resulting from the increase in gas prices also should warrant greater use of telephone rather than in-person interviews.
- **Using food stamp education and training funds to pay gasoline costs:** through the Food Stamp Employment and Training Program (E&T), states can draw down federal matching funds to provide Food Stamp Program recipients with important supportive services, including transportation reimbursements. State E&T Plans submitted to USDA's Food and Nutrition Service by August 15th each year typically describe how the state will handle reimbursing clients for travel necessary for them to participate in employment and training. States can revise the reimbursement policies during the year. With energy costs rising, states should review their current E & T reimbursement plans to assess whether the transportation reimbursement levels are adequate to meet the needs of food stamp participants and increase them as warranted. For guidance on State E&T plans, check the USDA FNS web site at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Memo/Support/pdfs/handbook-2003.pdf>

##### 5. Child nutrition programs can help too.

There is less opportunity for child nutrition programs to respond directly to the energy cost problem, but there are some strategies that should be applied by schools and other child-serving institutions.

Do no harm. Already numerous school districts around the country are talking about shifting to four-day-a-week schedules in order to hold down gasoline costs (e.g., by having to run school buses only four days a week) and hold down heating costs.

Over the years, mayors and others have told FRAC how important school meals and child care food are to struggling families. Sometimes local officials describe how exceptionally important Friday meals are (because they know so many children are going home to mostly empty cupboards for the weekend), and Monday meals are (because children come in famished on Monday). This winter, many low-income children will have even less food available at home. It is distressing to think of schools going from five days to four-day schedules. Even aside from educational harm that may occur,

parents working at low wages will suddenly face mounting child care as well as food costs, or will be leaving children home alone with little food or heat.

Similarly, some schools are talking about lowering the thermostat during the school day and then lowering the temperature even further (e.g., to 60 degrees) for afterschool programs.<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, temperatures that are so low that they make children sick or inattentive, or keep them from coming to school or afterschool programs, are counterproductive as well.

School officials, public officials and anti-poverty groups must guard against schools cutting costs (or generating revenue) in ways that would negatively affect their students' health and well-being. Even if schools concentrate academic studies into four days, they must not limit children's access to care while parents work, and to school breakfast and lunch. Similarly, schools must not reduce afterschool services or drive children away from afterschool programs, which are a crucial support for working families. Quality afterschool programs engage students in educational and enrichment activities that improve their test scores, attendance, and behavior. The programs also keep children from engaging in risky behaviors. Afterschool snacks and, in some cases, suppers are an important part of any afterschool program.

Instead, schools and other providers should strive to feed more children more meals this winter, in order to ease the heat or eat crunch families face.

Among the steps they can take are:

- Working to expand participation in both school lunch and school breakfast, so family resources can be used elsewhere. Only about 43 low-income children eat school breakfast for every 100 who eat lunch. Schools can increase participation by outreach, adjusting bus schedules, serving breakfast from hallway carts, and a range of other steps. Lunch participation is also too low, as kids are lured away by competitive food vendors in school cafeterias and (for older children) in neighborhoods near schools. Children's nutrition will improve, as will their family finances, if efforts are made to get them into school lunch and breakfast programs. One strategy is for a school or district to reduce or eliminate (as allowed by federal rules) the 40 cent charge for lunch and 30 cent charge for breakfast applied to near-poor children (the "reduced price" meal charge), a seemingly modest amount that is sometimes an insurmountable barrier for families and will particularly be a problem this winter.
- Assuring that states follow federal school meals income rules (e.g., not counting LIHEAP income; giving categorical eligibility to children on food stamps) and aggressively use options (direct certification of students from food stamp households) that can increase access to the child nutrition programs.

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<sup>19</sup> "As fuel bills rise, schools turn off heat," Asbury Park Press, November 15, 2005, <http://www.app.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051115/NEWS/511150313>

- Working to expand afterschool programs, using available federal dollars for snacks and suppers both to attract children to programs and to improve program finances.
- In family child care, where federal Child and Adult Care Food Program dollars are critical to feeding children and keeping many child care providers afloat, states should work to get CACFP benefits on behalf of more children and to more providers (centers and family care homes alike) in order to help them get through a winter in which staggering heating bills will threaten their availability. Moreover, the CACFP sponsoring organizations, which must travel to conduct three home visits each year as part of supporting family child care providers' participation in CACFP, have been battered by high gas prices, especially in rural and suburban areas. States can take two steps to help assure that family child care providers continue to receive the assistance they need: 1) grant CACFP sponsoring organizations a "90 day review waiver," which allows sponsors to avoid unnecessary travel related to new "block claiming" requirements by extending the time in which follow-up reviews must be completed; and 2) maintain CACFP advance payments where available.

## **Conclusion**

The imminent heating cost crisis is going to have a devastating impact on America's low-income families. Years of erosion in both wages and public supports leave more and more families unprepared to deal with a big boost in the price of a commodity they need for survival.

The nutrition programs are far from a panacea for this problem, but they can help. There is still time to soften this winter's blow.