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More Than Half of State Legislators Urge Inclusion of Fuel Assistance in State FY 20 Supplemental Budget

Thousands of Households Have Run Out of Home Heating Oil Advocates Call for Formal Federal/State Partnership

Boston, MA, February 18, 2020 – In response to a second consecutive reduction in federal fuel assistance resources legislators in the Senate led by Senators Hinds and Tarr, and in the House, led by Representatives Mark and Wong, joined last week by more than half of their colleagues, **urged budget writers in both chambers to include \$15 million for fuel assistance in the FY20 Supplemental Budget.**

With bitter temperatures gripping the nation including New England, there is serious concern for the health and well-being of low-income households, especially the over 40,000 households that heat with oil. “Most oil heat households have used up their federal fuel assistance benefit,” pointed Joe Diamond, MASSCAP Executive Director. Approximately 160,000 households benefit from fuel assistance each year.

A state allocation of \$15 million will allow Community Action Agencies to help vulnerable households get deliveries of 100 gallons, “which could make all the difference in getting through the winter safe, warm, and healthy,” Diamond added. It will also allow for protection for gas and electric customers against potential termination following the moratorium (April 1, 2020).

Over the past three weeks, more than 100 Representatives and Senators added their name to letters to the House Ways and Means Chairman Michlewitz, Senate President Karen Spilka, and Senate Ways and Means Chairman Rodriguez in support of the \$15 million funding request.

“Absent this funding, families are forced to make difficult and often dangerous choices to heat their homes. In many cases, they opt for an alternative approach such as a space heater, stove, or fireplace, which increases the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Otherwise, they must make budgetary trade-offs that can jeopardize children’s health, choosing heat over food or health care,” stated the Senate letter. “Seniors, veterans, families with children and others are counting on our Commonwealth to provide the home heating support they need, particularly in light of the federal reductions.”

The letter from the House of Representative notes: “Current funding levels would drastically undermine the program’s ability to bridge an important gap in the day-to-day lives of residents; falling short of the three-to-four tanks of oil typically required to heat a household throughout a typical New England winter, available funds would only make 1¾ available.”

“The budget the President recently introduced which eliminates fuel assistance, sheds important light on how vulnerable people living with low incomes are to the potential volatility of federal resources and the kind of disruption that a crisis or an interruption of income can bring,” Diamond said. “Thousands of working individuals and families across Massachusetts and millions across the country live paycheck to paycheck. Fuel assistance can help bring stability and economic mobility to the lives of the people we serve.”

He continued: “Over the past 30 years, the legislature and the Governor have provided much appreciated state resources of between \$10 and \$30 million many times as needed. Fuel assistance is a defacto federal and state partnership.” For that reason, MASSCAP is also asking the legislature to make fuel assistance a regular line item, a provision that is part of the state budget each year.

“Legislators and the Governor have been very sensitive to the needs of our most vulnerable residents – children, seniors, disabled adults, and veterans – responding to urgent conditions during the supplemental budget process, allocating one of the largest supplements for a program that is not part of the regular budget,” Diamond said. He added that federal fuel assistance resources to Massachusetts, which have declined over the past several years from \$200 million to \$130 million, will likely continue their slide.

The Massachusetts Association of Community Action’s 23 private, non-profit human service and advocacy organizations work to administer key anti-poverty programs in every city and town in the Commonwealth. These organizations serve approximately 600,000 low-income people annually, more than half of them with incomes below 125% of the federal poverty level. Those interested in learning more about fuel assistance can visit MASSCAP’s website on the LIHEAP program, heatinghelpma.org, where information on eligibility and the agency serving their community can be found.

For more than 50 years, Community Action Agencies have been on the front lines of addressing poverty -- administering federal programs, federal community services and community development grants, and state funds. CAAs are economic engines in cities and towns across Massachusetts, providing communities with an annual infusion of over \$500 million in total resources. CAAs generate at least twice that amount helping clients achieve economic stability and mobility.

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