Directing Help Towards the Vulnerable: Joining Pennsylvania’s SNAP and Energy Assistance Applications

By Sarah Crowley
Roosevelt @ George Washington University

THESIS
As the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) directs funds to the most vulnerable households, it is imperative that all low-income households experiencing energy insecurity apply. The Pennsylvania state government should use a joint application to automatically qualify households that receive benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to also partake in LIHEAP.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS
In fiscal year 2011, almost seven million low-income American households were spending an average of 10 percent of their annual income on energy, such as heating and cooling. Non low-income households, by comparison, where spending on average only 2.7 percent of their annual income, or nearly four times less. This relatively high price for energy illustrates a condition known as energy insecurity, or “the inability to pay for heating or cooling required to maintain a home at a reasonable temperature.”

LIHEAP, a federal block grant funded through the Continuing Appropriations and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for approximately $3.43 billion, tried to address energy insecurity. It is the largest government energy assistance program for low-income households. In Pennsylvania, the funds are used almost exclusively for heating, falling into three categories of assistance: cash, crisis, and weatherization. Cash assistance accounts for 50 percent of LIHEAP PA funds.

Due to high demand and inadequate federal funding, LIHEAP PA cannot meet all eligible requests, instead prioritizing low-income households in danger of not being able to pay their energy bills, and therefore losing heat during the winter. Low-income households often are forced to spend less on food, education and healthcare in an attempt to keep the heat on in the winter months. A shutoff can exacerbate or lead to illness.

Additionally, under the Trump Administration, LIHEAP PA is anticipating a 25 percent reduction in funding. Therefore it is vital that policies be put in place to effectively prioritize those most in need of these funds.

TALKING POINTS
• LIHEAP is used to target low-income households most vulnerable to energy insecurity, and assist them in paying their energy bills.
• In other state studies, the outreach methods used to persuade low-income households to apply were found to be largely ineffective.
• Adequate heating improves the health of a household, and can lower healthcare costs.

KEY FACTS
• Only 42.6 percent of households below the federal poverty line are served by LIHEAP.
• The projected budget for LIHEAP PA is $171 million, with $123.5 million available for benefits—a 25 percent reduction since the last fiscal year.
• The Cash Assistance Program, the focus of this proposal, accounts for 50 percent of LIHEAP PA funds.
**POLICY IDEA**

LIHEAP PA aims to assist low-income households most at risk of losing their energy during the winter months, due to an inability to pay. In order to accurately assess which households are most vulnerable, and should therefore be given priority, the pool of applicants must be expanded to include the highest number of low-income households possible. The most effective way to accomplish this is by amending the SNAP application to include the LIHEAP application. Although the majority of SNAP recipients will not be given LIHEAP funds, the joint application will allow the government to identify and prioritize energy insecure households.

**POLICY ANALYSIS**

As of 2014, which is the most current public data, only 42 percent of households below the federal poverty line, therefore a priority to receive LIHEAP, actually received assistance. Although there is no public data to show how much this deficit in assistance is caused by a lack of outreach, it has been found in multiple other states that LIHEAP outreach is ineffective, and therefore leads to lower participation rates. Current policy aimed at outreach involves “public education activities” to inform eligible households about LIHEAP, and how to apply. Based on the other state studies of similar programs, these efforts have not been widely successful. Increased funding to these efforts is not an effective method to address energy insecurity.

The SNAP program in Pennsylvania, on the other hand, has a participation rate of 89 percent. To automatically enroll SNAP participants into LIHEAP would be a negligible cost. These enrollees would not be guaranteed LIHEAP funding, but because it would attract more low-income households to LIHEAP, funds could be more effectively prioritized to assist the most vulnerable.

Additionally, studies have shown that lessening the energy burden on low-income families will result in improved health, which financially benefits individuals and saves the state Medicaid and emergency room costs. This creates a compelling cost-benefit analysis for implementing the proposed policy.

**NEXT STEPS**

To gain a better understanding of the extent to which outreach hinders assisting low-income households, Pennsylvania should publicly release data that shows the percent of households that actually applied to LIHEAP. Based on other states, we can assume this data will show a substantial number of low-income households did not apply to the program. This data can be used to lobby the Pennsylvania government to join the SNAP and LIHEAP application in an attempt to better reach these households.

An important ally for this step would be The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania. The Housing Alliance’s partners include major state businesses, such as PNC Bank and Heinz Endowments, as well as government agencies including the Pennsylvania Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Housing Alliance can pressure the Secretary for the Department of Human Services, Teresa D. Miller, to release the application data.

Once there is adequate data to support a joint application structure between LIHEAP and SNAP, both the Housing Alliance and private utility companies (who would benefit from the proposed policy due to the decrease in utility shutoffs) should lobby both DHS and Governor Wolf to enact the policy. Because SNAP and LIHEAP are both administered by the Department of Human Services, the joint application will be easily integrated.
ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

ENDNOTES

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Advanced Data and Analytics.”
3 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
14 Iowa Department of Human Rights, “Outreach Strategies for Iowa's LIHEAP program.”
15 Ibid.