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## **Community Action Turns Up the Heat on Congress, Legislature**

JEFFERSON CITY – Swift legislative action is needed on both the state and federal levels to help an increasing number of low-income Missourians who suffer the cold and economic hardships of winter, says the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA).

Heating assistance proposed Monday by Gov. Matt Blunt is a big step in the right direction, said MACA Executive Director Elaine West. But now the Missouri Legislature must act quickly to approve \$6.4 million in state funding for the Missouri UTILICARE program, and additional federal funding is dependent upon a budget agreement between Congress and the President.

“Urgent action is needed as temperatures drop into winter and people lack enough resources to keep their homes warm,” West said. “The cost of heating a home is rising sharply. Already this fall, applications for energy assistance are up by 50 percent, even before winter has officially started.”

Missouri’s 19 Community Action Agencies, which serve all areas of the state, distribute home heating assistance to qualified individuals. Last year, 211,025 households received heating assistance.

This year, some agencies already have run out of money, while others are nearing depletion.

In Kansas City, the United Services Community Action Agency has faced rising demand, said the agency’s executive director, Tommie Barnett. “A record number of clients are reporting their energy is cut off. We had 2,000 more clients contact us for utility assistance in November 2007 than in November a year ago.”

In St. Louis, Merline Anderson, executive director of the Community Action Agency of St. Louis County, said: “We are all in crisis. Customers’ bills are higher, so they need more assistance, and Community Action is running out of money before winter has even started.”

Blunt’s plan will redirect \$5.2 million in federal funding to crisis energy assistance to make up for the failure of Congress and the President to agree on a budget, which is holding up federal heating assistance. His plan also will provide an additional \$6.4 million in emergency state funding for UTILICARE this year, if the Missouri Legislature approves his supplemental request after convening in January.

West said part of the governor’s plan will immediately benefit Missourians, but the Legislature must quickly approve the supplemental funding request to prevent a gap in assistance during the coldest part of winter. Furthermore, a federal budget agreement is needed quickly in Washington so the full amount of federal assistance is available, she said.

“Delays in legislative action will be tragic for families who need a modest amount of assistance during the winter to cope with high heating costs,” West said.

According to a recent energy report from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, heating costs have risen over last year by 12.2 percent for natural gas and 24 percent for propane.

The U.S. Department of Energy’s Residential Energy Consumption Survey reports that in the Midwest, most residential consumers use 3-4 percent of their household income to pay energy bills. But for low-income people who receive federal energy assistance, the energy burden is about 12 percent of their incomes.

About 45 percent of low-income families report they often do without food or medication in order to pay home energy bills.

More than 769,500 Missourians live in federally defined poverty – the poorest of the poor. Thousands more have incomes that still fail to cover basic living expenses. Missouri’s Community Action Agencies provide a variety of services in every community to help low-income Missourians become self-sufficient.