



The seasonal bulletin of the Low-Income Energy Network (LIEN)

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- **Ontario budget cuts reduce funding for energy bill assistance programs**

The Ontario government announced in the 2012 Budget that it would eliminate the Community Start-up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) and the Home Repairs Benefit for people on social assistance. The Home Repairs Benefit ended as of June 30, 2012. CSUMB will end as of December 31, 2012. These program cuts are projected to save the government \$162 million over three years.

CSUMB can be used to prevent disconnection of utilities (gas, electricity, water) or to restore utility services if there has been a disconnection of service. It can also be used for utility deposits. The Home Repairs Benefit was used to repair or replace unsafe electrical wiring, and furnaces or wood stoves.

Starting January 2013, 50% of the funds spent on the former CSUMB will be moved from the Ministry of Community and Social Services, along with the provincial Emergency Energy Fund (EEF), and will be combined with four other homelessness-related programs into the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) under the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The other half of the CSUMB funding is simply cut from the provincial budget. CHPI will be administered by municipalities and will serve an even larger pool of low-income people, not just those in receipt of social assistance. Municipalities will have more flexibility to decide how to spend the CHPI fund to address local priorities.

The CSUMB cut will increase the demand on existing low-income energy programs, like the Ontario Energy Board's LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance (EFA) program, which provides grants to low-income energy consumers facing short-term difficulty in paying their electricity or natural gas service bills.

Currently, the provincial EEF and the LEAP EFA programs work in tandem. When the maximum grant available through LEAP EFA is not sufficient to resolve a low-income consumer's financial crisis and keep their electricity and/or natural gas service connected, the household can access an additional grant through the provincial EEF to sustain their service. Also, the provincial EEF uniquely provides grants for fuel types other than electricity and natural gas, i.e. oil, propane and firewood.

To find out more about the campaign to reverse the CSUMB cut, and five things you can do to help, please visit:

<http://sareview.ca/isac-news/act-now-to-save-housing-supports-for-people-on-ow-and-odsp/>

- **saveONenergy Home Assistance Program offers free retrofits**

The saveONenergy HOME ASSISTANCE program (HAP) helps income-eligible Ontario homeowners, tenants and social and/or assisted housing providers improve the energy efficiency of their homes free of charge. Participating in the program can help reduce energy use, help manage energy costs and improve home comfort. HAP is offered through participating local electric utilities and funded by the Ontario Power Authority.

If you would like more information on the availability of the program in your area or to indicate your interest and ensure that you are contacted when the program is available, please call the Ontario Power Authority 1-877-797-7534. You can also visit the saveONenergy website at www.saveonenergy.ca for additional information.

- **Addressing problems with roll-out and delivery of OEB's Low-Income Energy Program (LEAP) initiatives**

LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance is a comprehensive, year-round emergency financial assistance program developed by the Ontario Energy Board to assist low-income energy customers better manage their bill payments and energy costs. It came into effect in January 2011. The OEB also put in place customer service rules specifically for eligible low-income electricity customers. These rules, which came into effect in October 1, 2011, supplement the customer service rules applicable to all residential electricity customers. Natural gas utilities have also committed to developing appropriate standards and practices specific to low-income customers which will come into effect no later than January 1, 2013.

Members of LIEN's steering committee, who represent social service agencies which provide direct service to low-income energy consumers, identified a number of implementation issues (such as exhausting EFA funds before year-end, appropriate terms for arrears payment plans and delays in lead agency response) with both the Low-Income Customer Service Rules and the Emergency Financial Assistance. We raised our concerns in a letter to the OEB chair and they were discussed at the June 6, 2012 meeting of the OEB's Financial Assistance Working Group.

- **LIEN renews call for a permanent low-income electricity rate affordability program as bills projected to rise by 46% by 2015**

The Ontario government's Long-Term Energy Plan has estimated that electricity bills will increase 7.9 per cent in each of the five years from 2010 to 2015 for a total increase of 46 per cent - and by an average of 3.5 per cent over the 20 year period from 2010- 2030.

LIEN's comprehensive plan to address energy poverty includes the creation of a low-income energy rate assistance program. Such a program was dismissed by the Ontario Energy Board in its March 2010 decision to establish the Low-income Energy Assistance Program. However, in the face of rising electricity prices, LIEN has put together a cost estimate for a ratepayer-funded electricity rate affordability program and renewed calls to put such a program in place. Our program would be targeted to eligible low-income consumers only (about 733,000 households), unlike the provincial government's five-year Ontario Clean Energy Benefit. This benefit is not based on need and is provided to four million residential electricity customers annually at a cost to taxpayers of over \$1 billion annually.

LIEN Currents is issued seasonally by the Low-Income Energy Network for members and others interested in solutions to energy poverty in Ontario. For more information, contact the LIEN Coordinator at bhanjiz@lao.on.ca or 416-597-5855 ext. 5167 or toll-free at 1-866-245-4182 ext. 5167. You can also visit our website at www.lowincomeenergy.ca

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