

The Vermont congressional delegation today opposed a White House budget proposal that would nearly cut in half a heating assistance program for seniors and low-income families with children.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said "heat in the winter is not a consumer choice. It's not a luxury." Instead of cutting heating assistance, Leahy said Congress should end tax breaks for oil companies that "are just using them to make obscene profits."

Sen. Bernie Sanders was the chief sponsor of a 2008 bill that increased federal heating assistance. He said he was disappointed in the president's budget proposal. "This senator will do everything he can to make sure that the budget is not balanced on the backs of the weak, the vulnerable, the sick or the old who can't afford to heat their homes in the winter," he said.

"This is simply wrong," added Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.). "We must not balance the budget at the expense of Vermonters struggling to heat their homes in winter. Instead of turning off the heat, we should be turning off the billions of dollars in subsidies we provide the oil industry."

The delegation led an effort in Congress that doubled funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program to \$5.1 billion a year for the past three years. The program provides critical assistance for senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and low-income families with children.

Nationally, more than 8 million Americans rely on the program to stay warm in the winter. If Congress goes along with the president's budget proposal, more than 3 million Americans would be denied the help they need to keep their heat on during the winter.

Vermonters today are paying nearly \$3.50 a gallon on average for heating oil, up more than 70 cents a gallon from last year. At the same time, the average grant for Vermonters is less than it was last year because more families now qualify for help. About 27,000 Vermont households will receive assistance this year, up from 20,350 households last year.

Delegation Joins Forces on Home Heating Assistance

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See video from the press conference below: