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State to help needy keep warm

\$20 million will help poor pay heating bills; homes to be winterized

By Gargi Chakrabarty, Rocky Mountain News
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Colorado will fork out \$20 million to help needy families cope with soaring heating bills this winter. It also will grant \$4 million to weatherize homes or make them more energy efficient.

That's on top of the \$30 million the state receives each winter, including this year, from the federal government's Low-income Heating and Energy Assistance Program, or LEAP. House Bill 1200 also authorizes \$21 million in heating assistance and \$15 million in home weatherization assistance beginning in 2007 for the next three years.

Gov. Bill Owens signed the bill on Friday, the first bill he has signed so far this year. "I'm happy to sign this bill right away so needy families can benefit from the proceeds as quickly as possible," Owens said. "The elderly, disabled and the state's poorest - these are the people we will be helping with this bill."

The money will be paid from a severance tax the state collects from oil, natural gas and mineral producers. Colorado is on track to collect \$200 million in severance taxes for 2005.

Consumers have been hit hard by rising energy bills this winter, due to a threefold increase in the cost of natural gas from three years ago, compounded by a slowly recovering state economy.

The money authorized by the bill will be available within two weeks. A qualifying low-income family would receive \$500 this winter, a \$200 increase from the current average benefit of \$300.

Introduced on Jan. 26 by state Reps. Bernie Buescher, D-Grand Junction, and Jim Sullivan, R-Larkspur, and Sens. Moe Keller, D-Wheat Ridge, and Ken Kester, R-Las Animas, the bill was one of the fastest to pass both the House and the Senate.

Of the \$20 million, the Colorado Department of Human Services will receive \$17 million. The department distributes federal funds to needy customers. The department estimates that as many as 105,000 Colorado families will seek assistance with their heating bills this winter.

The remaining \$3 million will go to Energy Outreach Colorado, the state's largest nonprofit agency, but the money can be used from May through October when the LEAP offices are closed. "This will help families catch up with their bills before next winter," said Skip Arnold, Energy Outreach's executive director.

The Governor's Office of Energy Management and Conservation will get \$4 million to weatherize homes of low-income and needy families. The state agency received \$10 million in LEAP funds and another \$2.5 million from Xcel Energy this year that it plans to use to weatherize 4,000 homes.

Drew Bolin, the OEMC's executive director, said the additional money from HB 1200 will be used in various ways, including weatherization of up to 8,000 homes in the coming years.

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