

State Funding for Home Weatherization

When I came to Vermont ten years ago to work in a home heating assistance program there was a heating crisis. Unfortunately, we have had a heating crisis every year since, and this year is looking like it will be the worst yet. The future for home heating in Vermont, across all income groups, is not looking too rosy either.

Yet each year the media attention is solely focused on the immediate need for emergency funds with nothing said about actually solving our heating problem. Sadly, it seems like keeping all Vermonters warm each winter has become an accepted perennial crisis with no end in site.

Vermont's heating crisis will continue to get worse until we do something serious about the underlying problems and not just focus on the immediate needs. It is great to see Vermonters coming together and organizing fundraisers and giving to heating assistance programs - those donated funds are urgently needed - but all that effort amounts to a proverbial band-aid on a growing wound.

We started to address the problem when we were smart enough to create state funding for our home weatherization program. This program is making real progress in improving the heating efficiency of low-income homes, despite declining federal support of such efforts.

However, in a classic case of myopia, our Governor and Vermont legislators are taking funds away from the weatherization program to divert the money into the emergency heating assistance program.

Vermont needs thoughtful action and strong leadership to get us out of our perennial heating crisis. A bold ten year plan to solve our heating crises and keep more of our heating dollars in state would include the following:

- create a private heating efficiency “utility” that is charged with reducing our heating fuel consumption by 20%
- expand the weatherization program and incorporate it into the new heating efficiency utility
- make low-income housing as energy efficient as possible to reduce the need for heating assistance. For example, the Barre Housing Authority converted its Green Acres low-income family housing development to a wood based district-heating system and saved about 75% on heating costs, reducing the tenants need for heating assistance to zero
- increase our use of locally grown biofuels (biodiesel and wood) for heating
- provide state wide planning, policy creation, and study of heating fuel supply issues and opportunities to meet our future heating needs in the best way possible
- build biomass district heating systems in Burlington, Montpelier and other downtowns

- increase the use of solar heating to meet 10% of our heating needs (properly built and sited homes in Vermont could easily meet 60% of their heating needs with the sun)
- increase the use of geothermal heating

We need to decide if we want to really solve our heating crisis or continue to just deal with its consequences each winter. Solving the problem will not be simple or free, but not dealing with the real problems will cost us much more each year and could lead to catastrophic failures in keeping us all warm in the future.

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