

LIHEAP: Sanders Appeals To House's Conscience

By Patrick Dahl

Electric Co-op Today reported Dec. 22 that President Clinton took exception to the White House-Congressional budget stand-off, authorizing release of \$578 million in LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) funds. Because the President took that action on LIHEAP, the individual states, at least for now, will have heating funds to distribute this winter.

Even more heartening, though, is the story behind the story. It is about one member of the House of Representatives—Vermont's at-large Congressman Bernie Sanders—and what he did to make it all happen.

Sanders, a socialist and the only House member serving as an Independent, appealed to the conscience of the Congress to build a bipartisan groundswell of support that broke loose the LIHEAP funds.

The story really began early in the week of Dec. 4 when a concerned Rep. Sanders met with his Vermont staff in Burlington to discuss LIHEAP funding.

As Sanders spoke, temperatures in Vermont were plunging to 15 degrees below (F) or more. Constituents were blitzing his congressional offices at

home and in Washington with calls and letters. They came from mayors, the media, city selectmen, state officials, legislators, social welfare officials, private charity workers and social activist groups, as well as constituents who were being turned away for LIHEAP funds. They told of the frail and elderly poor without heat; of young families with children going to bed and staying there because there was no heat; of desperate household decisions made between food or fuel, hunger or hypothermia; of homeless persons suffering from frostbite.

"Bernie knew many other House members from cold-weather states were also getting calls like this," said Jane O'Meara Sanders, the Congressman's wife and unpaid administrative assistant who runs his Washington and Burlington offices. "What we decided to do," she told *Electric Co-op Today* "was organize. It was clear that the Republican Congress was not going to act. It had 'zeroed out' the program. So we focused our efforts on Executive Branch action," she said. "We knew the White House could release the funds but first, there had to be a demonstration of Congressional support and media coverage to call attention to the plight of these people."



Rep. Bernie Sanders

Contacting House colleagues, mostly Democrats who had voted for LIHEAP in previous sessions, Sanders began to get a lot of signatures to his letter asking President Clinton to release the funds. A chain reaction set in, which spread to sympathetic House Republicans. Of the 130 members who finally signed on, there were 113 Democrats, 26 Republicans and one Independent (Sanders).

Sanders held a new conference Dec. 14 with about 30 other House

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members present. They urged President Clinton to release \$300 million in emergency heating reserve funds, citing that the cold snap of the weekend before had taken 12 lives around the country.

"The failure of the Labor-Health and Human Services-Education spending bill has resulted in massive shortfalls in the LIHEAP programs," Sanders said. "It has forced many states to operate their programs on

an 'emergency only' basis. Because these cold-weather states spend most program funds during the winter months, a budget agreement in February, March or April will not prevent people from suffering in the cold today."

Three days later, Sanders got a call at home from the White House. President Clinton, working with HHS Secretary Donna Shalala, had found a way to release \$578 million, saving the \$300 million in emergency funds for later. That brought the total of

LIHEAP funds to be released this winter to \$810 million.

Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-North Dakota, one of the signers, said, "If it were not for the leadership of Bernie Sanders and other members in requesting the Administration's release of the necessary funds to continue heating assistance, many of our state's poorer and elderly people would have simply been forced out of their homes." □