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Heat vs. eat is untenable choice

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While high gas prices have become a major issue, another fuel cost hit to family budgets is around the corner: skyrocketing bills for home energy.

According to the federal Energy Information Administration, prices for gas and home heating oil are nearing \$5 a gallon in some places, up nearly 70 percent in the last year.

Utility bills already have risen 30 percent in the past five years on average nationally, and utilities are raising rates further in many parts of the country in response to higher fuel costs. Puget Sound Energy has made a regulatory filing to charge higher rates for electricity and natural gas.

In this region, as everywhere, higher home energy costs will hit the poorest families hardest. They now spend six times more of their income on utilities than middle- and upper-income families and often face desperate choices to "heat or eat."

Democrats are calling for more funding for the federal low-income home energy assistance program, which helps poor families pay their utility bills. This funding is necessary, and it is unfortunate that Republicans have so far blocked these urgently needed additional resources.

But home energy assistance can only help a fraction of those who need it and will not address a primary cause of the problem: Millions of low-income homes and apartments waste energy because they were poorly built and have been inadequately maintained. Families have been forced to pay more for less.

This is an energy challenge that is in our grasp to solve with relatively modest investments in what we know works today.

Basic improvements in efficiency – insulation, caulking and sealing; window replacements; installation of energy-efficient equipment and systems – can cost just a few thousand dollars per home. These improvements cut energy use by as much as 40 percent, saving low-income families hundreds of dollars a year.

Investing in energy efficiency in low-income homes could also jump start the construction industry and create good paying "green job" opportunities in career track professions for low-skilled workers. In Germany, a program to perform energy retrofits on 200,000 homes saved or created 140,000 construction jobs during an industry downturn.

Low-income home energy efficiency helps the environment too. The 34 million households eligible for federal home energy assistance generate 276 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually, 27.5 percent of total emissions from residential units overall, according to the Energy Programs Consortium. Cost effective energy efficiency improvements could cut these emissions by 50 percent.

The government does not need to create a big new program to bring home the benefits of energy efficiency to more low-income families. For owner-occupied and smaller rental properties, increased support for weatherization programs, such as the Seattle Office of Housing's HomeWise initiatives, could help in the near term. For medium-sized and larger rental properties – where most low-income families live – targeted investments in the successful federal "HOME" block grant, specifically for energy efficiency improvements, would have a similar impact.

Looking ahead, most observers expect the next Congress and administration to act on climate change. Increasing energy efficiency in the homes of our lowest-income citizens should be a priority. A portion of auctioned carbon "emissions allowances" under a cap and trade system should be allocated to weatherization and housing block grants and to support public-private partnerships for residential energy efficiency among housing organizations, utilities and local governments.

Increasing the energy efficiency for the millions of low-income homes and apartments that need it would require a long-term commitment. Families facing higher home energy costs need immediate help paying their bills starting this coming winter. But those costs – for families and the government – will only rise, affect more families and add to pollution unless we also start to improve the underlying energy performance of their homes.

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