

Trump proposes cuts to heating aid while US house fire deaths spike

By Steve Filips
1 March 2018

There have been 599 lives lost so far in 2018 across the United States, including 61 child fatalities, with this season's severe winter and frigid temperatures driving the brutal escalation in fatalities.

This a significant rise over the same period last year, which saw 490 lives lost with a toll of 52 children under 14 years old. The previous heating season saw a total of 1,239 perish in fires between September 15, 2016 and March 15, 2017. This will be far surpassed this year with 1,396 lives lost since September 15 of last year.

Amidst the onslaught of debilitating injuries and unrelenting loss of lives caused by house fires, the Trump Administration is proposing to eliminate from the 2019 federal budget the lifeline for many low-income people, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). The program was funded with \$3 billion for this season, a decline from \$3.3 billion in the previous winter.

The average amount of funds received by those that receive LIHEAP aid is a miserly \$366. While more than 101 million Americans met the poverty guidelines to qualify, less than 17 million applied for the aid in 2016.

Despite Trump's tax giveaway to corporations and the wealthy utility companies are now demanding double-digit rate increases, illustrated by the example of National Grid, which provides services to customers in the northeastern US. Amongst an array of price hikes it is asking from the New York state Public Service Commission, long known as a rubber stamp, is a 20.5 percent raise in the natural gas delivery price.

This year's increase in fatalities from house fires has been concentrated in the southern US where colder than usual weather has far exceeded the capabilities of an already substandard housing stock, which is

inadequately winterized, often lacking basic insulation, forcing residents to rely on space heaters to compensate.

Texas, which is leading the US with 41 deaths attributable to house fires, has more than doubled the total number of deaths over the same period last year. The toll in Oklahoma has jumped from only nine last year to a staggering 32 lives lost to house fires while Pennsylvania saw an increase from 22 to 36 people.

The house fire crisis has not shown any signs of abating. A fire in Yorkville, just outside Utica, New York in January took the life of seven-year-old Taylor Mishlanie and badly injured her mother Heather Mishlanie, 41, who was airlifted to University Hospital in Syracuse where she later died from her injuries.

The fire broke out on at approximately 10 p.m. on January 18. Local media reported that the closest hydrant or hydrants were frozen, which is likely to have hampered efforts to extinguish the blaze and rescue the occupants. The old-style construction of the home acted to intensify the fire to the point of causing the roof to quickly collapse, further causing delays at rescue.

The two-family apartment building did not have smoke or carbon monoxide detectors in the second floor and appeared to lack insulation. It is likely that the residents were forced to rely on supplementary space heaters in order to remain warm to endure the frigid temperatures.

Heather's friends set up a Go Fund Me page to raise money to help pay for medical and funeral expenses.

The poverty rate for Utica in 2016, according to the US Census Bureau, is 31.2 percent overall, while among those 18 years old and younger it is 48.5 percent.

The deaths of a young homeless family in January

that was struggling to survive the winter in a recreational camper in rural upstate New York serves to highlight the dire conditions that are faced by the most vulnerable sections of the working class in the United States.

The fire broke out early in the morning, taking the lives of Debbie L. Pfeiffer, 33, along with her children Benjamin Pfeiffer and Amber Morrow, one and 10 years old respectively.

The cause of the fire is unknown though likely related to inadequate insulation of the camper—considering its temporary nature—and the likelihood of the use of multiple supplementary heating sources in an attempt at making the camper habitable through the winter months.

Whether or not LIHEAP will be subject to further cuts, inadequate, dangerous housing combined with increasing heating costs due to severe cold and utility price hikes alike will guarantee that entirely preventable house fires will continue to claim lives across the United States.

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