

With over 630 killed in house fires so far this year

Trump budget proposes to end heating assistance, slash housing program

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The Trump administration's budget proposal released last week slashes or outright eliminates federal funding for social programs that provide aid to working class and poor families coping with poor housing and high heating bills.

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, is slated to be eliminated under the Trump budget by 2018. The program had a budget of \$3.4 billion in 2016 and provided heating assistance to people in households that are below 150 percent of the federal poverty rate, although states are allowed to reduce that to 110 percent.

In 2014, according to LIHEAP, only 6.4 million households received assistance paying heating bills out of the 38.5 million households that were eligible to receive some aid.

Just over one-third of all US households qualified for heating assistance. With an average of 2.64 people per household, a staggering 101.6 million Americans were poor enough to have received heating help even though less than 17 million did so.

LIHEAP aid has been slashed in recent years by both Democratic and Republican administrations; in 2014 the average benefit payment was a meager \$366 annually.

Trump's budget for the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) would slash funding by \$6.2 billion, or nearly 14 percent for fiscal year 2018.

The agency, which was created in 1965 under the Johnson administration's Great Society initiative, is tasked with assisting in the creation of quality, affordable housing.

With many people already struggling to maintain the

housing that they have or frantically searching for affordable, better quality, and safer shelter, these cuts will only further harm those families who face long waits—often years—for affordable public housing.

As federal housing aid comes under the axe, poor and working Americans continue to contend with stagnant wages, climbing utility bills and substandard housing.

Intense pressure is put on households during the cold winter months when many workers find themselves falling behind on heating bills, forcing many workers to do without heat or rely on hazardous alternatives, putting them at the risk either freezing to death or dying in a devastating house fire.

Since the onset of the winter heating season, which started on September 15 last year, there have been 1393 reported deaths due to house fires, and in less than three months so far this year, 632 people have been killed. Most of these deaths were preventable and a large proportion were caused by residents forced to use space heaters because of high utility bills and poor housing.

There is a heightened risk for those living in deindustrialized sections of the Northeast and Midwest, where the death toll leads the nation. So far this year 37 people have been killed by home fires in New York state, followed by Pennsylvania with 31, Ohio and Illinois with 30 and 29 respectively.

Some of the preventable house fires in the past few weeks provide a striking picture of the real housing conditions the working class and poor endure in the US.

On Sunday, March 12 a call for help came at 3 a.m. reporting a house fire near Rochester, New York. An 86-year-old woman and a 26-year-old man were killed by the fire.

Local fire officials have said that power was out at the home and that the blaze started in the fireplace. The first responders that arrived on the scene found a running generator. A neighbor interviewed by local media said that most of the homes in the area had backup generators due to frequent power outages.

Early on Saturday, March 4 at 12:45 a.m., a house fire was caused by a wood-burning stove in the western Massachusetts town of Warwick. Lucinda Seago, 42, and four of her five children aged 7, 9, 12, and 15 all died in the fire. Her husband Scott and one child survived.

The parents were both employed, Scott was in the IT industry and Lucinda graduated school in 2014 to become a nurse and was working in a long-term health care facility.

Firefighters that responded to the rural home faced significant challenges that delayed them: there was not readily available water and the bitterly cold temperatures froze equipment when water was trucked in.

On March 2 in Brutus, New York, located just west of Syracuse, a fire at a mobile trailer claimed the life of one unnamed male victim in his 60s. At least four fire departments responded when smoke was reported around 11 a.m. Responders found the unconscious man, attempts to revive him failed and he was pronounced deceased at the scene.

On March 1, in Mt. Upton, New York, a rural area northeast of Binghamton, J.R. Franklin, a 16-year-old who was deaf and autistic, perished in a fire caused by a wood-burning stove that was the sole source of heat being used in the mobile trailer that was his home.

The slashing and outright elimination of federal housing aid, which often make the difference between life and death for the poor, meager as it is, will guarantee that the numbers of those killed in house fires will rise.



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