

Earth Day and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)

The Compounding Effects of Energy Burden and Climate Change on Low Income Households



This Earth Day, the Office of Community Services (OCS) is excited to highlight the role the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) plays in addressing the impact of climate change, and advancing environmental justice including racial and energy equity.

[Research](#) shows that low income households and people of color face systemic disadvantages in energy costs, stable energy supply, access to renewable energy resources, energy efficiency technologies, and the economic and health benefits of the clean energy economy. A long history of redlining and [discrimination in energy and housing policy](#) have forced many people of color to live near or in hazardous environments that are plagued with pollutants and toxins, leading to high rates of intergenerational health disparities and death. Sustained and widening income and wealth gaps, caused by structural racism, have forced low-income households and households of color to remain in these communities, often relegated to older homes with poorly functioning energy infrastructure. These energy inefficient homes require more energy to heat and cool, resulting in a higher energy burden for individuals who often already struggle to make ends meet. As a result, when costs are high, many households are more likely to use riskier methods of heating including stoves and space heaters, risking fire and carbon monoxide poisoning.

THE FACTS:

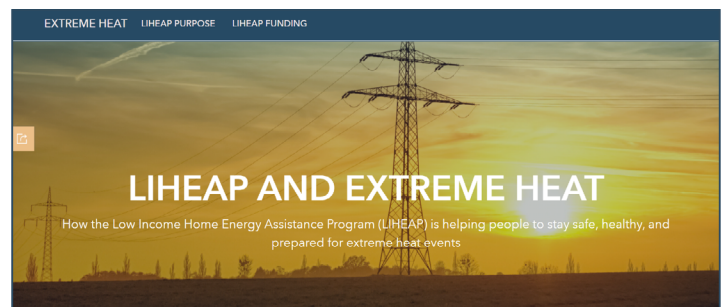
Low-income households spend **three times more** of their income on energy costs than more affluent households. **67%** of low-income households experience high energy burden. Black households' energy burden is **43%** higher and Hispanic households' energy burden is **20%** higher than White households.

As we move into the warmer months, it is also important to reflect on the impact of the changing temperatures on vulnerable households. **Extreme weather events have become more frequent over [the last 20 years](#), with extreme heat killing more Americans than any other weather-related disaster as heat waves continue to get longer and hotter.** A [recent study](#), examining over 700 locations across six continents, found that, on average, **37 percent of all heat-related deaths were directly caused by climate change.**

Households with a high energy burden (the percent of income spent on home energy expenses) have a higher chance of accumulating unmanageable arrears and being disconnected from services. They also are more likely to suffer from extreme heat and other natural disasters, creating financial and health concerns that impact individuals' and families' wellbeing.

Heat Stress GIS Tool

This Earth Day, OCS released a new Heat Stress Geographic Information System (GIS) dashboard to help our grant recipients and stakeholders track, visualize, and respond to heat stress trends and needs across the country. This tool is part of a larger OCS strategy to provide the necessary training and technical assistance needed to help mitigate the effects of climate change on LIHEAP households.



Given the variety of supports that the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) can provide and the fact that natural disasters and climate change disproportionately impact low-income individuals and families, LIHEAP is particularly poised to help address energy needs and the effects of climate change, while simultaneously increasing the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable populations.

LIHEAP'S ROLE IN ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & RACIAL & ENERGY EQUITY

Since 1981, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) has been providing critical energy assistance to those most in need. Eligible households receive benefits for heating, cooling, crisis assistance, weatherization, minor home repairs to reduce energy consumption and make homes more energy efficient, and other vital services to help ensure safe indoor air temperature. Serving over 5 million households annually, LIHEAP is a lifeline to many individuals and families who would have faced shutoffs or would have had unmanageable arrears. By helping to bridge the home energy affordability gap and reduce [the energy burden placed on low-income families and individuals](#), particularly those with the lowest incomes, LIHEAP helps to promote racial and energy equity as well as environmental justice.

GRANT RECIPIENT SPOTLIGHT

As a block grant program, states, territories, and tribes have the flexibility to use LIHEAP funding to respond to natural disasters and extreme weather to meet the needs of their local communities. For example, the [Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma](#) recently developed its own LIHEAP disaster relief policy that includes responding to severe weather (e.g., excessive heat temperatures, ice storms, blizzards, high winds and/or hail caused by tornadoes or thunderstorms). Under this disaster relief policy, LIHEAP can be used to provide assistance for heaters, air conditioners, or generator units, as well short-term hotel/motel assistance to mitigate an energy crisis caused by severe weather.

LIHEAP's Impact by the Numbers

In Fiscal Year 2020, LIHEAP:



Reduced energy burden by an average of **~35%**



Provided cooling assistance to over **900,000 households**



Prevented the loss of home energy services of **over 1.4 million households**



Helped **5.6 million households** pay their energy bills



Provided an average heating assistance benefit of **\$429**



Served **over 50,000 households** with weatherization or minor home repairs



CELEBRATING EARTH DAY

This Earth Day, OCS is highlighting energy equity's strong connection to environmental justice and racial equity. Today, we celebrate the work that LIHEAP and our grant recipients at the state, territory, and tribal level have done to promote environmental justice and racial equity in their communities; and we look forward to continuing our work to ensure energy equity for all.