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DIRECTORS OF STATE ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS CALL ON FEMA TO RECOGNIZE EXTREME HEAT AS A ‘MAJOR DISASTER’

Low-Income Families Risk Debt and Dangerous Utility Shut Offs Due to Record High Cooling Costs, Rising Summer Heat, and Lack of Shut Off Protections

The National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA), representing the state directors of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) whose job is to support families struggling to pay their utility bills, sent a letter today urging the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to recognize extreme heat and wildfire smoke as “major disasters” under the Stafford Act. Recategorizing these increasingly common and deadly climate change impacts would unlock emergency funds that could help protect families from utility shut offs during periods of extreme heat, preventing families from going into debt, and saving lives.

The letter from NEADA adds to a growing chorus of voices calling on the Biden administration to lead the way in developing a more robust federal response to keep people safe during periods of extreme heat. In June 2024, labor unions teamed up with more than two dozen environmental and justice organizations to send a [rulemaking petition to FEMA](#) urging the change, followed a month later by a similar letter by [14 attorneys general](#).

“FEMA uses its power to provide necessary federal support when hurricanes, tornadoes, or other natural disasters ravage communities,” said **Mark Wolfe, Executive Director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association**. “Heatwaves and wildfire smoke should be treated no differently. The climate emergency is driving up the frequency and intensity of extreme heat events and subsequent wildfires—we’re seeing it happen across the U.S. right now. So FEMA must respond to the present moment, and to the needs of low-income Americans, by adopting the petitioned changes to its regulations.”

Extreme heat is deadly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that extreme heat resulted in [2,302 deaths in 2023](#), the highest number in 45 years. Wildfire smoke, which has smothered vast swaths of the continent during recent record-breaking wildfire seasons, also has serious [health effects](#). However, because FEMA’s regulations do not recognize extreme heat or wildfire smoke as “major disasters,” states are unable to access vital funding that is provided when FEMA makes “major disaster” declarations.

Instead, states are left with limited funding, and local governments are forced to respond to increasingly common extreme heat waves using a patchwork of short-term solutions and funding sources not meant for emergency response. For example, as utility costs and summer temperatures rise, local governments are turning to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) program to help low-income households pay their monthly utility bills and avoid utility shut offs, which can be life threatening during heat waves.

LIHEAP funds are meant to help families pay routine heating and cooling needs, not to cover emergency responses to extreme heat. Furthermore, given the \$2 billion in budget cuts to LIHEAP, the program's funding is depleted in the winter, and there is none left to help cover the increased outlays that families must pay for summer cooling.

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The National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA) represents the state directors of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and serves as the program's representative to the Federal government as well as providing training and educational programs.