

Plan urged for \$10M in heating aid for schools, nonprofit groups

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On the heels of a plan to distribute \$3.5 million in heating aid to senior citizens, Gov. M. Jodi Rell this week released proposals to divvy up similar grants among nonprofit groups and school boards.

"The plans I'm submitting are simple and straightforward," Rell said in a statement Wednesday. "There are no applications required, almost no processing time for the state and no burden at all on the nonprofit providers or school administrators."

The General Assembly required three distribution plans for using a surplus from the last fiscal year to help residents with rising heating costs.

Democratic leaders have five days to review the proposals and forward them to legislative committees, which have 30 days to consider them.

Rell said the \$3.5 million targeted at the state's social service providers will be distributed by the agencies that contract with them: the Department of Children and Families, Department of Correction, Department of Developmental Services, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Department of Public Health, Department of Social Services, the judicial branch and the children's trust fund.

Rell said nonprofit groups will be eligible for a portion of the money equal to the size of their contracts with the state.

The biggest slice - \$1.6 million - will be distributed by DSS, the largest agency. In announcing the senior aid Tuesday, Rell erred in saying the state was providing another \$500,000 to Operation Fuel to administer the \$4 million the legislature set aside.

According to Rell's budget office, the \$500,000 was subtracted from the \$4 million.

"It seems like a very fine distribution plan," said Terry Edelstein, president of Connecticut's Community Providers Association.

Edelstein said she was pleased by Rell's emphasis on making prompt payments to nonprofit agencies.

"One of the obstacles sometimes is that there are contract amendments that have to be filed and those have to go to the attorney general's office and need tons of signatures," she said.

But \$3.5 million in heating aid, though appreciated, will only go so far, she said.

"It's not going to alleviate all of the problems, by any means," Edelstein said.

Rell on Wednesday also proposed divvying up the \$6.5 million the General Assembly set aside for classroom heating through a formula that multiplies the number of students per district by \$11.94.

Under that scenario, Stamford would receive \$179,100 for 15,000 students; Norwalk would receive \$125,071 for 10,475 students; and Greenwich would receive \$107,149 for nearly 9,000 students.

Rell said the amount per student would decrease to about \$11.63 if lawmakers decided to also provide aid to charter schools, magnet schools not run by municipalities and the state's three public academies.

Richard Freedman, president of Stamford's school board, said Rell's formula was reasonable. The state could allot the grants several ways, including by basing it on how much education aid cities get through the state Education Cost Sharing formula, he said.

"In our budget this year, we had a significant increase for heating fuel and natural gas," Freedman said. "We had to cut teaching positions. And I'm sure every school district in the state is in the same position."

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