



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
Week of December 07, 2009**

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Coping With Old Man Winter

JEFFERSON CITY – I suppose the warmer-than-normal temperatures had to end sometime, but Mother Nature didn't fool around with her first blast of winter weather this week. Much of the upper Midwest was blanketed under a foot or more of snow, while the mercury dropped to single digits and the wind chill was downright dangerous. If you haven't already winterized your car or truck, now would be a good time to get it done. Basically, you just want to keep a few items in your car to keep warm in case you get stranded – a blanket, a hat and a pair of gloves. It's not a bad idea to keep a first aid kit in your vehicle, plus a flashlight and a small radio, while a small bag of sand or cat litter can help your tires get traction on slippery surfaces. The Missouri Department of Transportation provides a list of road conditions across the state by visiting their website at www.modot.mo.gov.

This is also the time of the year when our utility bills climb as we crank up the heat to beat the cold, and that can be a real problem for low-income Missourians and elderly folks on fixed incomes. Fortunately, Missouri lawmakers addressed this issue in the late '70s by passing the "cold weather rule." The cold weather rule prevents utility companies from turning off the electricity or natural gas to your home if the temperature drops below 32 degrees (it does not apply to city-owned power companies, electric coops or companies that deliver propane). The cold weather rule also allows residents to stretch their utility payments over a 12-month period, it allows consumers to avoid paying a deposit if they meet their minimum payments, and it requires utility customers to be notified by mail and in person before service is cut off. The cold weather rule runs from November 1 to March 31 each year.

A number of community action agencies also offer heating assistance during the winter months. Residents of Adair, Clark, Knox, Schuyler and Scotland counties can contact the

Northeast Missouri Community Action Agency at (660) 665-9855 for assistance. If you live in Lewis, Marion, Monroe, Pike, Ralls or Shelby County, call the North East Community Action Corporation at (573) 324-2231 for heating help. People who live in Audrain County and need heating assistance should call the Central Missouri Counties' Human Development Corporation at (573) 443-8706.

Our state's largest utility company – Ameren UE – is getting into the holiday spirit by donating \$100 for energy aid to 500 families who need help during the economic downturn. Ameren UE officials are working with charities and community organizations to identify customers who need help but might not qualify for traditional heating assistance programs. Once identified, those 500 families will receive a \$100 gift certificate from Ameren UE this Christmas.

Another option for Missourians struggling to pay their utility bills is the Missouri Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). This program is designed to help pay heating bills for Missourians in need of assistance during the months of October, November, December, January, February and March. Applications for this year's program are being accepted in Community Action Agency offices throughout Missouri. If you need more information about LIHEAP, contact the Missouri Department of Social Services or your local community action agency.

Of course, one way to reduce your winter heating bills is to make sure your home is weatherized. Customers of Missouri Electric Cooperatives can request a complete home energy audit that can reveal sources of air leakage, duct leaks or ducts not properly connected, insulation settling, or other problem areas. Contact your local electric cooperative and request a comprehensive home energy audit and a blower-door test.

Community Action Agencies also offer programs for low-income households to provide an energy audit and weatherization improvements. To qualify for these programs, you must meet certain income requirements.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.