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Dan Brown

## **Bush's "Poor Kids First" Kept Sick and Freezing**

George W. Bush explained his recent veto of the bipartisan-supported Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act, because he says he wants to put ["poor kids first."](#)

The president's (and his supporters') logic here is that expanding funding for the popular State Child Health Insurance Plan would mean that more people than those living in rock-bottom poverty might get access to government-subsidized healthcare, and that would be a grievous wrong. He contends that only kids born into the most desperate poverty should get help outside of private, market-priced insurance-- whether they can afford it or not.

And now he wants to cut government-subsidized heat to low-income households.

Bush took less than a week to prove through his actions that he could not care less about poor kids at any level of poverty, and is in fact, actively working to keep them sick, freezing, and unable to elevate themselves. "Poor kids first" is hogwash.

Using the pathetic trick of releasing the mean-spirited announcement on a Friday evening, the week's lowest-buzzing moment of news coverage, the Bush Administration wants to cut the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), a move which will literally leave 30 million low-income households in the cold this winter.

Oil costs are rising, and the Bush administration's response is to pull the plug on homes that can't afford the market-priced heat.

Reuters [reports](#), "LIHEAP has an interim annual budget of \$2.16 billion, but the White House wants to cut the program to \$1.78 billion for the 2008 spending year that began on October 1."

LIHEAP was founded in 1981, but its funding has not kept up with inflation or energy costs. If it did, its budget would be \$4.2 billion. Rather than expanding the program to meet the needs of struggling Americans, Bush wants to contract it.

The president's fears of middle-class freeloaders getting government help do not apply here. The households using LIHEAP are poor by any American standard.

About two-thirds of the households that receive LIHEAP assistance have annual incomes of less than \$20,000. One day Bush says "poor kids first," and then the next, moves to shut off their heaters. And you can be sure that no one who supports Bush's cutback has ever himself spent an icy winter without access to heat.

In a stirring Boston Globe [editorial](#), Deborah A. Frank and Joseph P. Kennedy II point out a devastating statistic:

"Young children in poor families who receive energy assistance through the federal LIHEAP are 32 percent less likely to require admission to the hospital on the day of their visit to the emergency room than eligible families who do not receive LIHEAP."

This program lets people live. How can the Bush Administration propose to cut it by 44% from its 2005 funding level? Don't they have money for this vital program?

The answer is yes, they certainly do.

Frank and Kennedy illustrate, "the federal government collected \$10 billion dollars in royalties from oil and gas companies in fiscal 2006 - a small fraction of the \$77 billion that oil and gas companies received from the sale of oil and gas produced from federal lands and waters."

I teach at a middle school in East Harlem where all of the kids are poor enough to qualify for free lunch. I see their intense struggles every day against the crush of poverty to achieve. It makes me sick to think how much damage would be done to them, medically, emotionally, and educationally, if their government needlessly shut off their heat this winter.

America's citizens--and its media--can't let this tragic and mean-spirited proposal slide by. We may be a "great nation," but are we good?

*Dan Brown is the author of the inner-city teacher memoir, "[The Great Expectations School: A Rookie Year in the New Blackboard Jungle](#)."*