

MEDIA RELEASE

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Affordable Energy Group Gives Government Low-Grade on Energy Poverty

Halifax, March 25, 2008 – A coalition of poverty, social justice, and environmental organizations focused on ensuring universal access to energy released their third annual grading of the government's policies to combat energy poverty, and the government continues to do worse instead of better.

The Affordable Energy Coalition says the government's has yet to implement real solutions to energy poverty at the end of a particularly cold winter that saw energy assistance programs running out of money and continuous calls for home heating help that seemed to take the government by surprise.

Regarding home heating costs the Premier MacDonald stated that "we would never leave a Nova Scotian behind as a government" in the middle of the winter.

The Coalition includes members that work directly with those in need of heating help and organizations that monitor policy and represent low-income interests.

"Not only are low-income Nova Scotians being left behind, it is actually the government that is opposing energy affordability solutions," says Kathleen Ives from Dalhousie Legal Aid Service.

The Coalition gave the province a failing grade for energy assistance, in large part due to the government's opposition to a human rights challenge Dalhousie Legal Aid Services made to the province's Public Utilities Act in response to the Board's refusal to consider energy affordability policies for low-income electricity users.

The Coalition says the government should be writing legislation to make the Board implement energy affordability policies that utilities implement throughout the New England states, instead of acting as the chief opponent to low-income advocates in legal proceedings.

Louise Smith-MacDonald of Every Woman's Centre in Sydney notes that this is not just an urban issue experienced by individuals in Halifax. "Energy poverty is a province wide issue and the rural community faces unique barriers in accessing energy assistance programs."

A much better grade of B was provided for low-income energy efficiency. This year Conserve Nova Scotia doubled the amount of low-income homes that will receive energy retrofits from 100 to 200. The Coalition is pleased to see the expansion of the program. With almost 80,000 households in low-income, the Coalition is urging the government to aggressively expand energy efficiency for all Nova Scotians, while ensuring a significant portion of the investments are dedicated to low-income households.

An overall grade of D- is down from the D+ the Coalition gave the government last year.

Implement Solutions for Next Winter Now

With winter nears its end, the Coalition is urging the government to start working now so a comprehensive and effective energy poverty reduction strategy can be implemented next winter.

The Coalition says no low-income household in the province should spend over 6% of their income on energy. To keep energy affordable the Coalition says the government can increase efficiency, increase income, or provide direct assistance in the form of fixed credits on energy bills.

They say these more targeted policies will be more effective than blanket rebates offered through the old "Keep the Heat" program or the HST sales tax rebate.

"No one should live in energy poverty. Through a combination of aggressive energy efficiency and assistance targeted based on energy use and income we can make sure everyone has access to affordable energy," said Brendan Haley from the Ecology Action Centre.