

JAMES H. DOUGLAS
GOVERNOR



State of Vermont
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

**Official Remarks of the Governor
Announcing the Vermont Fuel and Food Partnership
Thursday, June 12, 2008**

Thank you President Handy for your hospitality—I'm delighted to be at Vermont Technical College to announce an important, wide-ranging, collaborative effort to help Vermont's families address the rising cost of fuel.

Today, we are taking meaningful, additional steps to help Vermont respond to the national recession that has caused our state such marked economic anxiety. Every Vermont family is facing the realities of soaring gas prices, rising food costs and the threat of home heating oil reaching unaffordable levels in the coming winter.

Solving these problems will require an effort that goes beyond government alone.

We're fortunate to live in a state where there is a strong network of community-based organizations and programs to help Vermonters when times get tough. Our partners like the Area Agencies on Aging, Community Action Agencies, Efficiency Vermont, Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, Vermont Economic Development Authority, Vermont Housing Finance Agency, and the Vermont Foodbank, among many others, are very important and very valuable allies in our efforts to protect the most vulnerable and build a stronger, more innovative economy.

Vermonters care about each other. In communities across our state, organizations and individuals are stepping up to help Vermonters in need, in creative and effective ways. The state Seasonal Fuel Assistance Office is working with the Vermont Sustainable Heating Initiative (VSHI) – led by students at Mt. Abraham and Montpelier High Schools – to help low-income individuals convert from fuel oil to wood pellet furnaces.

The Fuel Assistance Office recently received a call from the Union Bank requesting information for a fuel awareness day they will be holding, to help educate Vermonters about how to prepare for the upcoming fuel season.

And right here at Vermont Technical College—the home of innovative energy efficiency and renewable energy programs—there is a community garden where employee volunteers sow,

plant, weed and harvest. Once a week community members are able to purchase fresh organic produce from the garden at very affordable prices. The local food shelf receives regular donations of fresh vegetables from the project as well.

Great things are happening, but not all Vermonters know about these efforts.

We need to bring together all of this creative energy, compassion and information – we need to marshal all of our resources – to ensure that we make the most of every dollar, help reaches those who need it most and, most importantly, that no Vermonter is left in the cold.

To bring everyone together—and to harness all available resources--I have established a cabinet-level task force chaired by Lt. Governor Brian Dubie and Secretary Neale Lunderville. And I have directed them to focus every effort and every resource Vermont can bring to bear to help manage the effects of higher energy costs on Vermont families.

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Like other Americans, every Vermont family and business understands the stark reality of skyrocketing gas prices. With gasoline approaching \$4.25 a gallon and diesel near \$5.00 a gallon Vermonters are paying dearly at the pump.

The hard fact is there is very little we can do at the state level to effect the international oil markets in the short term. I'm pleased Congress is beginning to consider action that could provide Vermonters with relief from skyrocketing oil and gasoline prices. While I will continue to take every step available to state government to hold down the price of fuel – like continuing to oppose increases in the gas tax – ultimately Vermonters know that federal action is also necessary to address this growing energy crisis.

I applaud our congressional delegation's work to move the debate in the right direction. I also encourage all members of Congress and the Bush administration to make this fundamental economic issue their top priority.

The cost of gas and worries about the upcoming heating season are topmost on Vermonters' minds. That's why these issues must be addressed immediately and effectively by officials in Washington D.C.

The programs I outline today are practical, near-term and meant to help deal with the realities we face today when it comes to sky-high gas prices.

Today we're launching a new website to give commuters the tools to make more affordable transportation choices. ConnectingCommuters.org will provide Vermonters with a range of options to help them identify more affordable transportation options and locate alternatives to single-occupancy commutes.

This site will be a one-stop way to plan trips using bus route maps, to locate convenient park & ride locations across Vermont, offer tips on fuel conservation and identify locations with the

lowest gas prices. We're also providing links to an online carpool matching system for Vermonters, so we can all pitch in and use the ties of community to help save gas.

I'm e-mailing state employees, encouraging them to carpool and use other transportation options to help cut down on the number of car trips generated within state government. With 9,000 employees, state workers can have a real effect on energy usage by carpooling, teleconferencing and limiting official travel.

The Park and Ride system lets Vermonters drive to convenient, local points to access mass transit and meet carpools. This summer I've asked VTrans to expedite our 20% expansion of the Park and Ride system. And we will work with the MPO and Regional Planning Commissions to identify capacity in private lots to add additional Park & Ride spots for Vermont commuters.

We're also seeking new ways to help Vermont businesses compete by using technological solutions. Many of Vermont's traditional rural industries rely on diesel trucks. To improve the efficiency of these trucks, I've asked VEDA to explore a low-interest loan program to equip them with Auxiliary Power Units (APUs). These units can help lower costs by giving truckers electrical power without idling and burning \$5.00 a gallon diesel fuel.

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As food prices rise along with the cost of fuel, we need to make sure families don't go hungry in Vermont. There are some things state government can do to help, and there are other things that will require neighbor helping neighbor. And some things are just common sense.

We will extensively promote Vermont's "Buy local" initiative through the Agency of Agriculture, as well as the "Grow an Extra Row" gardening program. Over the coming weeks as Vermonters tend to their gardens, we hope they'll plant an extra row of produce to donate to their local food shelf.

Locally grown Vermont produce is among the finest in the world and now it's a more affordable option than ever. Shifting just 10% of Vermont's food consumption to locally grown meat, dairy and produce would not only save Vermonters money but would also pump \$130 million dollars into our state's economy.

At my direction, the Agencies of Agriculture and Human Services are expanding the ability of farmers' markets to accept debit and EBT cards. There are presently three farmers' markets with this capacity and we will expand that number to 15 this summer. This will provide Vermonters—including our food stamp recipients—more convenient access to fresh, affordable, locally grown food.

The federal food stamp program is one of the best was for use to assist the most vulnerable Vermonters. At the present time, only 70% of those eligible for food stamps use the service. To be sure everyone eligible has the opportunity to benefit, I've asked the Agency of Human Services to enhance our outreach efforts to ensure those eligible for food stamps receive them.

Lt. Governor Dubie will also work with AHS and the Area Agencies on Aging to ensure no elderly Vermonter goes hungry.

Finally, we'll be working closely with the Vermont Food Bank, local food shelf programs and Meals on Wheels to encourage community-based charitable efforts to support them. These organizations are supported largely by private donations. I hope to encourage those Vermonters who can to join Dorothy and me in making donations to the Vermont Food Bank, and our local food shelf and Meals on Wheels program. Even the smallest donation can make a real difference, and it is in the best Vermont tradition to reach out to help a neighbor in need.

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Today, the sun is shining, another beautiful Vermont summer is upon us, and the last thing we want to think about is another winter heating season—but we must.

We must face the growing reality that fuel prices this winter may be out of reach for many families. Though fuel prices are a product of the international market, Vermonters have in our power the ability to take steps to make homes more weatherized and energy efficient and to use less fuel.

As Governor, I am committed that no Vermonter should spend this winter – or any winter – in the cold.

Vermont has the most generous Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) in the country, and we benefit from a robust weatherization program. In total, Vermont state government is presently investing over \$32 million in fuel assistance and weatherization programs. We also enjoy the generous support of our private and non-profit community partners like Efficient Vermont and the Community Action Agencies who contribute millions more to the effort.

But spending isn't the only answer. Our goal must be to reduce demand for fuel—and demand for these assistance programs—by making homes more fuel efficient. Simple, low-cost tasks, like getting a furnace cleaned and serviced, saves on average 18% in fuel costs over the winter season. It's hard to argue with the cost-effectiveness of these services.

We will encourage Vermonters to tap the extensive resources the state offers to make their homes more energy efficient, to weatherize them against the elements, and to assist families who are struggling to pay heating bills. There are public and private programs across Vermont to serve a variety of heating needs, and we will work tirelessly to integrate their efforts with those of the state and to direct Vermonters to the most effective programs for their needs.

We will establish a Winter Heating Helpline and a Vermont Winter Heating Assistance Website which will serve as one-stop clearinghouses for all energy assistance programs. To provide Vermonters with additional access to the information and resources they need to address fuel costs, we will also organize and conduct 8 regional energy workshops over the summer and we will engage the Town Energy Committees in our effort as well. Vermont 2-1-1 will also serve as our partner to direct Vermonters to our helpline for additional services.

Through these one-stop clearing houses of information, Vermonters will be able to tap expert advice, obtain services for weatherization, energy efficiency programs and fuel conversion. These resources will also help qualified families apply for LIHEAP.

Expanding access to existing services is only one part of the solution. We understand that increased demand will require increased resources to help Vermonters make smart weatherization and efficiency choices.

Today, I am pleased to announce that we are on track to release an additional \$1 million into the traditional weatherization program that serves individuals and families at or below 60% of the median income. This money will help community action agencies provide weatherization services to the most vulnerable.

Of course, there are many Vermonters that don't qualify for existing weatherization programs, but still have a demonstrable need for the services. To serve these individuals and families, I am taking steps to infuse additional resources that will help expand the reach of existing programs.

I am asking the Agency of Commerce to release \$2 million in Community Development Block Grant funds to community-based weatherization and energy efficiency programs.

I am also proposing the creation of a State Weatherization Revolving Loan Fund that will provide no or low-interest loans to middle income Vermonters for weatherization and efficiency upgrades. With a \$9 million state investment over four years, we can help two to four thousand homeowners with up to \$20 million in needed energy improvements. All of these weatherization and efficiency improvements have a quick payback—with all of the savings going back into the pocket of the homeowners. This is especially true as fuel prices continue to rise.

As market demand for efficiency and weatherization expands through our efforts, we must also grow the number of qualified and trained contractors capable of providing these services.

The Vermont Department of Labor will help develop workforce training programs to quickly expand the number of qualified and trained contractors in the fields of energy auditing, weatherization and alternative energy system installation.

These professions will assist Vermonters with retrofitting existing homes for energy savings and building new energy efficient homes. Working with the Community Action Agencies and Efficiency Vermont, Vermont Technical College and other partners we will accelerate these essential training programs.

These are difficult times for working families, but Vermont has faced these kinds of challenges before, and is a national example of how deep community roots and a strong commitment to seeking new solutions can resolve even the most difficult challenges. I know that the strength

and determination of Vermonters will lead us past these difficult times and leave us with a state that is stronger and more energy independent than ever before.

What I've laid out today is the start of a very strong program to address the rising cost of fuel. All of these ideas, and those that will develop as the task force continues its work with our partners, can be accomplished by working together.

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