Old Astoria Neighborhood Association (OANA)
www.OANA-NY.org

Help Homeowners Through the Heating-Oil Shock

By Richard Khuzami

Owning a home does not mean having money to spare. In Astoria, many residents live in the same one-, two-, or three-family homes they have maintained for decades. For some older owners, Social Security and rent from another apartment are what allow them to pay their bills and remain in the neighborhood. A sharp increase in heating costs is not an inconvenience. It can upset the entire household budget.

This winter, that concern is particularly serious for homes that still depend on heating oil. NYSERDA's October 29 report put the statewide surveyed price at $6.371 per gallon on October 26, compared with $3.801 a year earlier—a 67.6% increase. NYSERDA described statewide prices as the highest on record. In my own building, my October bill was $6.41 per gallon, compared with approximately $3.60 last year—an increase of about 78%. These are price comparisons, not forecasts of the entire winter's bill, but they show the pressure homeowners already face.

When one boiler supplies heat and hot water to several apartments, the resident-owner must cover the fuel bill for the building, not just their own household. That bill arrives alongside property taxes, insurance, repairs, and ordinary living expenses. Rental income is not the same as disposable income, and a valuable home on paper does not pay an oil delivery invoice.

HEAP provides important help to eligible households. But its gross-income eligibility limits can exclude people who still cannot comfortably afford their heating bills. Its rules allow certain rental-property expense deductions, but they do not amount to a full assessment of what remains after taxes and unavoidable living expenses. We need to address the households that fall through those cracks, not assume that failing an eligibility test means they can afford the expense.

Congress should create a temporary, refundable heating-oil affordability credit for low- and moderate-income homeowners who occupy their one-, two-, or three-family buildings. New York State should consider a comparable benefit rather than wait for Washington. Both routes deserve consideration, with coordination to prevent excessive reimbursement of the same purchases.

The benefit should be straightforward: documented residential heating-oil purchases, a reasonable household cap, an income limit with a gradual phaseout, and a clear expiration date. Absentee-owned investment properties and second homes should not qualify. The program should include single-family resident-owners as well as those whose central boilers serve tenant apartments.

Refundability matters. A deduction may provide little relief to someone with modest taxable income. A refundable credit can provide assistance even when the homeowner owes little income tax. That distinction is important for seniors and other financially constrained owners.

New York already recognizes that homeownership does not necessarily mean financial security. The Senior Citizen Homeowners' Exemption and Disabled Homeowners' Exemption provide property-tax relief to qualifying resident-owners. These programs could offer streamlined eligibility pathways for an

additional heating benefit, while a separate income test would include working-age homeowners who qualify for neither.

The State has also authorized a higher senior-homeowner income threshold beginning July 1, 2027, subject to local adoption. NYC legislation would implement that expansion. This does not create heating assistance, but it recognizes the need to update the standards used to identify financially vulnerable homeowners.

A fuel credit would require legislation, but documenting purchases is not an unfamiliar task. New York's existing Clean Heating Fuel Credit uses supplier invoices and fuel-purchase information. A broader affordability credit could use a similar reporting approach, with its own eligibility rules and safeguards.

It is not necessarily too late to cover 2026 purchases. Congress has enacted retroactive tax relief before. Lawmakers could specify coverage for documented purchases in 2026 and 2027, although a later tax refund would not solve every immediate cash-flow problem.

There will be an understandable objection: why help people buy fossil fuel when we should be moving away from it?

These homeowners need heat now, and existing rehabilitation incentives do not necessarily reach them. New York City's State-authorized J-51 R program requires at least three apartments and limits eligibility to specified rental, cooperative, condominium, and regulated buildings. It does not provide a practical route for the ordinary owner-occupied one-, two-, and three-family houses at the center of this proposal. Telling these residents to convert their heating systems is not an answer unless they have access to financing, suitable incentives, and time to complete the work.

This should not be permanent support for heating oil or funding for new oil equipment. It should be capped, temporary protection for people already dependent on existing systems. Longer-term assistance should help them reduce that dependence.

We can support a cleaner-energy future without ignoring the people who must get through this winter first.

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