

Oregon lawmakers pass heat wave relief law

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers passed a measure meant to ensure that future extreme heat waves, such as the one last summer that accounted for more than 100 deaths, will not have similar results.

Senate Bill 1536, which got final clearance on Friday, March 4, would allow tenants to use portable cooling devices — defined as air conditioners and evaporative coolers, either mounted in a window or sitting on a floor — with some conditions and exceptions.

It also sets aside millions

for the Oregon Department of Energy, Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Human Services to help pay for cooling systems, provide portable air conditioners and promote community shelters for cooling and heating.

The final votes were 22-3 in the Senate and 49-9 in the House.

The bill combines elements of a separate bill (House Bill 4058) that was considered Feb. 4 in the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources. Chairwoman Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, said lawmakers decided to merge them into one bill.

“Oregon has been a place where we didn’t think we needed cooling devices. But conditions are changing — and rapidly,” Marsh said. “Protecting the health and safety of vulnerable residents now requires us to make sure they have access to both cooling and heating. We must do everything we can to make sure we never see the kind of suffering we saw in the summer of 2021.”

The heat wave occurred June 26-29, 2021; the Legislature adjourned its regular session on June 26.

Tenants would still face some restrictions. Among them: Compliance with building codes, state and

federal laws; compliance with written standards for device safety; no damage to the premises, and no power usage beyond what a building’s electrical system can handle.

Tenants, not landlords, would be liable for injuries or damages caused by devices they install.

Rental units with construction permits after April 1, 2024, would be subject to new requirements for cooling in at least one room.

This provision prompted Rep. Kim Wallan, R-Medford, to vote against the bill. She said it would add to the already high cost of

housing construction.

Proposed spending

The bill also sets aside these amounts in the state budget:

- For the Department of Energy, \$15 million plus \$6.6 million in other funds for grants to the governor’s regional solutions teams and Oregon’s federally recognized tribes for heat pumps and other devices. Another \$10 million, plus \$5.6 million in other funds, would go toward rebates to contractors for installation of residential heat pumps. About 25% of that money is for housing built for people who earn less than the area median income,

and 25% for loans to housing owners whose tenants earn 80% or less of the area’s median income.

Cooling centers would get \$2 million, and a study of cooling needs in public housing, manufactured home parks and recreational vehicle parks would get \$500,000.

- For the Oregon Health Authority, \$5 million for distribution of portable air conditioners and air filters, with priority going to people who rely on state and federal medical assistance.

- For the Department of Human Services, \$2 million for grants to organizations that run community shelters for cooling and warming.

Lawmakers approve stimulus payments

Some low-income workers would receive one-time payments of \$600

By ELLIOT NJUS
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers on Friday, March 4, approved a \$600 one-time stimulus payment to low-income workers who were on the job in the early days of the pandemic.

The payments would go to Oregonians who claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit in 2020, a tax break for low-income working households. The Oregon Department of Revenue said about 245,000 Oregonians would be eligible, with payments limited to one per household.

House Bill 4157 passed by wide margins in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature, with a handful of Republicans joining majority Democrats in supporting the bill. It now goes to Gov. Kate Brown for signing.

The state Department of Revenue would make the payments automatically for most eligible workers by the end of July.

The payments evolved from a 2021 plan for larger stimulus payments — up to \$2,000 — to essential workers who stayed on the job during the pandemic, and those who rejoined the workforce last fall.

Sponsors of the latest bill, though, said more targeted payments would have been administratively burdensome and would have required workers to apply. Payments could have been delayed by months or years as a result.

Directing the money to low-income working families, they said, would help ease the sting of rapid hikes in expenses like rent, gas and groceries.

“Cash payments make a huge difference in the lives of working families,” said Sen. Kathleen Taylor, D-Portland.

The payments, plus administrative costs, are expected to amount to nearly \$150 million, paid from federal pandemic aid approved by Congress last year.

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