'Whistle blower' helps stymie heating aid hike

Gov. James J. Blanchard wanted to raise the welfare benefits level 5 per-cent; the camp of state Rep. David Hol-lister, D-Laning, wanted to plunk it into home heating ald; and Republicans

Art Suchodolali isn't a lawmaker, but the West Blownfield auditor is one reason the Middigan Legislature ad fourned for the summer without solving part of the wildraw budget problem.

It seems to be someone needs to do some bonwowth, said Suchodolaki, who has done years of homework on the home heating aid portion of the Department of Social Services budget. He thinks if a worse than a waste, and he had quite an impact when he said so to the state Senate Appropriations Committee in June.

THE UPSHOT: The legislature is compared to the summer. The senate of the said so to the state Senate Appropriations Committee in June.

said so to the state Senate Appropriations Committee in June.

THE UPSHOT: The legislature in its closing days was split in three camps and deadlocked on what to do with #3 million of the \$2.1 Blanchard.

Gov. James J. Blanchard.

When he have to be the to the state of the stat

When he began blowing the whistle about irregularities in DSS approval of gas bill payments for welfare accounts, he found himself shifted to other duties and finally fixed by Michco.

T pointed out that the welfare recipients were pocketing the money, Suchodolski sald. They had no worries

because the state paid off the heating bills with a second appropriation — in other words, it paid the same heating bill twice.

In fact, the situation was even worse than it seemed at first glance because basic heating aid was 50 percent state and 50 percent federal funds, but the supplemental aid was 100 percent state money.

supplemental ato was two promotey.

MichCon was collecting its money either way and had no incentive to go after the errant customer.

The welfare recipient got a double benefit: extra benefits and no worries about turning down the thermostal bas been

FOR YEARS Suchoidshi has been writing letters to state and gas company officials.

Wayne Circuit Court dismissed his suit against MichCon, and the state Supreme Court turned him down on appeal in 1982. But his story became a chapter in a book by Alan F. Westin called "Whiste-Blowing: Loyalty and Dissent in the Corporation."

When he read in the newspapers this spring that welfare payments were an spring that welfare payments were an

called Sen. James DeSana, D-Wyandotte, appropriations chairman, and was invited to speak to the committee.

"I said, "You're proposing to increase the payment? The abuse in that program is substantial." They kinds went back and said, "Maybe we should take a look at it," Suchodolski said after the hearing.

There's no chance the state can pay the aid directly to the utility. A 1978 letter from then-DSS Director John Dempsey to Suchodolski says that federal regulations provide that "payments must be made to the grantee or his legal representative, with no restrictions imposed by the state agency on the use of funds by the individual."

on the use or sures by the legisla-ture's leading advecate of social ser-vices, proposed that heating aid be boosted from \$3,500 to \$1,700 a year. The Lansing lawmaker's goal is to aver all utility shutoffs to the poor. In the House Appropriations Com-mitte, Blanchard's proposed 5 percent general benefit increase was beaten down 10-9 when four Democrats Joined all six Republicans to oppose.

'You're proposing to increase the (home heating) payment? The abuse in that program is substantial."



The House panel then adopted Hollis-ter's heating ald plan on a 12-5 part line vote.

Welfare recipients marched on Lans-ing to demonstrate their needs, but back-room negotiations between lead-

ers of both parties in both houses failed to reach agreement. What bappens if lawmakers fail to agree in September on what to do with the \$43 million? Answered one: "It won't be spent."

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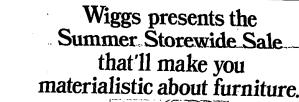
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