

'Whistle blower' helps stymie heating aid hike

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By Tim Richard
staff writer

Art Suchodolski isn't a lawmaker, but the West Bloomfield auditor is one reason the Michigan Legislature adjourned for the summer without solving part of the welfare budget problem.

"It seems to me someone needs to do some homework," said Suchodolski, who has done years of homework on the home heating aid portion of the Department of Social Services budget.

He thinks it's 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 in its closing days was split in three camps and deadlocked on what to do with \$43 million of the \$2.1 billion DSS budget.

Gov. James J. Blanchard wanted to raise the welfare benefits level 5 percent; the camp of state Rep. David Hollister, D-Lansing, wanted to plunk it into home heating aid; and Republicans wanted to use it on job training for welfare recipients.

No point of view had a majority, and lawmakers were itching to get out for the summer.

The \$43 million was put in a special line which may be appropriated," explained Sen. R. Robert Geake, R-Northville, a member of the appropriations unit. "But it was not appropriated. It has been left to be resolved in September."

"There was a general feeling a lot of the heating money was wasted," said Geake — but that's Art Suchodolski's story.

SUCHODOLSKI, 49, today is comptroller of Hack Shoe Co., a retail firm, but from 1972-76 he was a senior internal auditor with Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. in Detroit, where one of his responsibilities was the credit division.

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 fired by MichCon.

"I pointed out that the welfare recipients were pocketing the money," Suchodolski said. 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.

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 thermostat.

FOR YEARS Suchodolski 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 "Whistle-Blowing: Loyalty and Dissent in the Corporation."

When he read in the newspapers this spring that welfare payments were an issue in the legislature, Suchodolski

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 kinda 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."

HOLLISTER, known as the legislature's leading advocate of social services, proposed that heating aid be boosted from \$1,300 to \$1,700 a year.

The Lansing lawmaker's goal is to avert all utility shutoffs to the poor.

In the House Appropriations Committee, Blanchard's proposed 5 percent general benefit increase was beaten down 10-9 when four Democrats joined all six Republicans to oppose.

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— Art Suchodolski



The House panel then adopted Hollister's heating aid plan on a 12-5 party line vote.

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

ers of both parties in both houses failed to reach agreement.

What happens 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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