



Advocating for Older Adults of Today and Tomorrow

Testimony of

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On

Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program Allocation Plan

Appropriations, Human Services and Energy & Technology Committees

August 21, 2008

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the allocation plan before you for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) block grant. As you know, the Connecticut Commission on Aging is the independent state agency solely devoted to enhancing the lives of the present and future generation of our state's older adults. The Commission is also represented on the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board (LIEAB), established by CGS §16a-41b. This board, comprised of representatives of state agencies, community action agencies, utility companies, Operation Fuel, Infoline 2-1-1 and other interested parties, is charged with advising policymakers in the legislative and executive branches about energy assistance programs.

One of the Commission on Aging's longstanding priorities is to enhance choice in how and where people live as they age. Many of you have championed efforts that the Commission has supported to increase opportunities for individuals to remain in their homes whenever possible, instead of going into institutions. These efforts have included funding for the Connecticut Home Care Program for Elders, rental assistance, transportation options and Money Follows the Person.

Energy assistance is a critical component of these efforts. Simply, those who are unable to heat their homes are unable to remain in their homes.

Connecticut has more than 600,000 residents over the age of 60. Many of these older adults are on fixed incomes; in fact, in about 10% of the 293,000 Connecticut households headed by older adults, household income is below 200% of federal poverty level (\$20,800 for a single person).

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We know that energy costs hit low-income residents disproportionately. According to a recent report prepared for Operation Fuel, low-income families in Connecticut (with incomes at or below 185% of poverty, or \$32,560 for a family of three) experienced a “Home Energy Affordability Gap” of over \$1700 in 2007; due to escalating energy costs, this disparity between the cost of energy and the resources needed to pay for it has almost doubled since 2002, and will surely rise again this year. While others may be able to adjust household spending to account for increased energy and other costs, those with fixed incomes have little wiggle room. They are too often forced to make choices among food, heat and medical costs.

State residents are crying out for help with energy costs. The number one reason Connecticut residents call Infoline 2-1-1 throughout the fall and winter is for help with utilities and heating. In 2006, 2-1-1 had almost 41,000 requests for help with heating from across the state. About 11% of those calls came from people over the age of 60.

However, despite substantial efforts by 2-1-1, community action agencies and others to work within budgetary constraints to reach out to residents across the state, we know that there are thousands of Connecticut residents still in need. Many of them are eligible for energy assistance programs, but are not enrolled. The Commission on Aging recommends that funding be set aside to increase outreach efforts to vulnerable populations across the state, including frail older adults, those who are isolated, who have disabilities or who experience language barriers.

The Commission on Aging supports this allocation plan, which is projected to help almost 28,000 older adults in Connecticut this year. In addition to efforts to help residents pay for oil, natural gas and electricity, Connecticut makes a smart investment by committing to assistance with conservation as well. In this allocation plan, recipients of LIHEAP funds are eligible for weatherization assistance; a “clean, tune and test” of their heating system; and, funds for repair and/or replacement of unsafe or inoperable heating systems. These efforts buttress heating assistance initiatives by ensuring that heat is most efficiently provided. In addition, with our multifaceted national and statewide energy crisis—including our state having the second highest electric rates in the country and the cost of home heating oil more than doubling in just two years—these conservation efforts result in helping all of our state’s residents, not just those receiving energy assistance.

This LIHEAP allocation plan joins other state-level efforts to help residents meet the challenges of increased energy costs. Notably, the recent Bond Commission authorization of funds for a furnace rebate program will help many homeowners make the smart decision to replace old, inefficient furnaces with newer, energy-efficient models. Additionally, we support ongoing efforts by policymakers towards additional assistance beyond this allocation plan, particularly efforts which target those residents most in need.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to help individuals and families meet their energy needs. There is no doubt that energy assistance will literally save lives in our state this year.

The Commission on Aging is ready to serve as a resource to your committees and others as you finalize these and other plans for energy assistance. Thank you.