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**Patricia Wrice, executive director
Operation Fuel
Testimony
Appropriations Committee
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Good afternoon Senator Harp and Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Pat Wrice, and I am executive director of Operation Fuel. Operation Fuel provides emergency assistance grants to low-income households that cannot afford to pay their energy bills and either do not qualify for state energy assistance or have exhausted their state benefits. Operation Fuel utilizes a network of more than 100 fuel banks across the state to serve low-income households.

In its 33 years, Operation Fuel has distributed \$25 million to Connecticut's working poor families, the elderly, and the disabled who are ineligible for government energy assistance or have exhausted their benefits. Operation Fuel's mission is to partner with communities, businesses, government, and individuals to ensure people in need have access to year-round energy assistance. Operation Fuel is Connecticut's only source of year-round energy assistance.

During last year's legislative session Operation Fuel was allowed to carry forward \$5 million to be used this year. About 86% of the carry-forward money was rescinded leaving only \$750 thousand. In addition to the

State funding, Operation Fuel will use \$1 million of privately raised revenue to supplement the State funding.

At the end of April, some low income residents will begin receiving shutoff notices from utility companies when the winter protection program ends. Low income families have year-round energy needs. Families who are unable to pay for electricity in the summer can't refrigerate their food. Seniors who don't have electricity can't use fans or air conditioners to keep their homes at a safe temperature level during heat waves. This past summer when thousands of residents were in danger of losing their electricity, Operation Fuel provided limited funding of \$150,000 for emergencies.

There is no allocation for Operation Fuel in this year's proposed budget. Preliminary forecasts predict that funding for the Low Income Heating Assistance Program will be lower next year than this year's allocation. Outside of the funding granted to Operation Fuel, there are no state dollars allocated for energy relief for low-income families in Connecticut. We all know that energy costs in Connecticut continue to be among the highest in the nation, and they continue to increase at a rate that far outpaces families' abilities to keep up.

The gap between what households can afford to pay and their actual energy costs continues to widen as the cost of energy increases. As a result, more families are at risk of having to make choices between adequate nutrition, medical care, housing, and other basic necessities in order to pay home energy bills. In 2009, Connecticut residents faced a home energy affordability gap of nearly \$510 Million.

This problem is statewide—not just confined to our urban areas. The average shortfall between actual and affordable home energy bills was over \$2,200 per household. Even with a “robust federal program, that gap has increased this year.

Our lower income households continue to be vulnerable to having their heat and electrical services terminated. The home energy burden not only is on the lowest income households but has moved to households that historically have been considered to be moderate income, those with incomes between 150% and 185% of the federal poverty level.

Thank you for your time today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.