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Testimony of

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On

Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program Allocation Plan  
Appropriations, Human Services and Energy & Technology Committees

September 22, 2010

Good afternoon and thank you for considering our thoughts regarding the allocation plan before you for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) block grant. Though disappointed in the level of funding projected for this grant, the Commission offers support for the proposal.

As you know, the Connecticut Commission on Aging is an independent, nonpartisan state agency that is part of the legislative branch of government. As part of Results-Based Accountability, the Connecticut Commission on Aging is statutorily mandated (CGS §17b-420) to collect information on and make recommendations regarding the following Population Results: that all older adults are *healthy, safe, free from discrimination, economically self-sufficient* and *educationally fulfilled*. The Commission also serves as a member of the statutorily-mandated Low-Income Energy Advisory Board (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.

For over sixteen years, the Commission has served as an effective leader in statewide efforts to promote choice, independence and dignity for Connecticut's older adults and persons with disabilities. A major component of these goals is being able to afford to live in one's home, and energy assistance is a critical component of these efforts. Simply put, those who are unable to heat their homes are unable to live in their homes.

The importance of LIHEAP cannot be overstated. The ability to afford to heat one's home can literally mean the difference between life and death for hundreds of thousands of residents across our state each winter. Rising energy costs and a downturned economy have combined to put this ability out of reach for too many Connecticut households. According to Operation Fuel, the gap between actual and affordable home energy bills for households below 185% of federal poverty guidelines – the "energy affordability gap" – grew to over \$2550 per household for 2009.

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LIHEAP helps to fill that gap. Last year (2009-2010), LIHEAP served a record 113,000 households across our state. Of those, over 32,000 (28%) included an individual over the age of 60. According to the Elder Economic Security Initiative, **energy assistance is as important and as helpful as prescription drug assistance in helping older adults meet their needs.**

In regards to this year's plan, the Commission on Aging is disappointed in the likely loss of tens of millions of dollars in federal funds for this important program. Last month, we wrote to our Congressional delegation asking for speedy resolution of and adequate funding for energy assistance.

Until federal funding is resolved, the Commission offers support for the allocation plan before you. Unless additional funding is secured, from either the federal or state government, it will be essential to reduce both the number of households served and the level of benefits per household. The Commission is hopeful that additional monies will be available for this critical program.

We have the following additional comments for the committees' consideration:

- The Commission is pleased to see the maximization of federal funds, by shifting furnace repair/replacement from LIHEAP to ARRA Weatherization.
- The Commission supports the pilot program for year-round intake of applications. A 2008 Program Review and Investigations Committee Report found the annual application process "cumbersome", recommending a three-year renewal procedure. This pilot is a variation of that recommendation and addresses the same concerns expressed by the PRI report.
- Connecticut now has a number of energy assistance programs which are not entirely coordinated with each other. These programs include weatherization assistance (greatly expanded as a result of ARRA), utility arrearage forgiveness programs, Operation Fuel and LIHEAP. Coordination of these programs, whenever possible, would benefit consumers and improve program efficiency. Additionally, it is possible that additional dollars can be leveraged through better coordination.

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.