

PUBLIC HEARING TESTIMONY

Good afternoon members of the Appropriations, Energy and Technology and Human Services Committee. Thank you for holding this informational hearing on the need for a Low Income Utility Rate. I am the Rev. Hopeton A. Scott serving the historic First Baptist Church of Bridgeport where we operate a food pantry and fuel bank in partnership with Operation Fuel of Connecticut. Our Fuel Bank serves Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Trumbull and Easton.

Have you ever stayed in place in the middle of winter and had no heat? Or tried to help a child do her homework by candlelight or flashlight? Maybe not! Some of our clients have.

Throughout the past two years our office has experienced an average of fifteen calls a day from persons who are in a crisis to keep the lights on, have fuel for heat, or utilities to cook meals and refrigerate food. Many of these inquiries come from working families with limited incomes and they are unable to meet all of their basic needs on an ongoing basis. In some cases, a spouse or family member may have recently lost their job or received a reduction in work hours. The cost of living such as gas, healthcare, food and medication has resulted in fewer dollars to pay for their utilities. Our biggest challenge is helping families that do not qualify for state energy assistance who have no where to go except to Operation Fuel. But when Operation Fuel runs out of money, there is no other program or support available to these families.

During the 2009-2010 Program year, we interviewed more than 1,000 persons and we were able to help 660 households with grants totaling \$206,834.

During the months of August-September of last year we assisted 56 households who were eligible because of their participation in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families State-run program - TANF. Over \$28,000 was given to those families.

An additional 28 households received \$7,955 in grants during the Operation Fuel summer program.

As my staff works with these families, we often hear heart-wrenching stories which told of the frustration many felt as they found it impossible to keep up with their light or gas bills. Often, once they had fallen behind, the challenge of remaining current was nearly impossible.

One of the stories seared in my memory is of an elderly woman from the East End of Bridgeport. In order to meet her payments for light and gas, she did not have enough to pay for an oil delivery. She lived on a small pension and social security benefits. Up until the previous winter, she had been able to pay for a delivery of oil that seemed to last through the winter. In tears and trembling all over, this very dignified senior citizen came to us. Her humility, her earned sense of self worth and her years of independence had made it difficult for her to seek help from others. We were able to contact her vendor and arrange a delivery so that she would not live in the cold!

A special utility rate for low-income customers will help persons and families avoid having to make unpleasant choices: between paying a utility bill and buying food; between paying rent and having light in their home; between having needed medications and a working heating system.

I believe that this is a win-win situation for all concerned. Those low income ratepayers who continue to carry and amass large balances on their utility bills will never be able to pay off those balances absent some miracle. That is lost revenue to the utility companies. A lower rate would enable many of the people we see at our Fuel Bank to meet their obligations and allow them to live honestly and with dignity.

Thanks.