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**Testimony of Ellen Small Billard, MSW**  
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**Joint hearing of the Appropriations, Human Services, and  
Energy & Technology Committees**

**Concerning the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program  
Block Grant Proposal**

**September 27, 2011**

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the Appropriations, Human Services, and Energy & Technology Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Ellen Small Billard, and I am Coordinator of the CABHN Network—the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs. CABHN is a statewide advocacy and outreach network committed to helping Connecticut families meet their basic needs, achieve self-sufficiency, and attain economic security.

**I am here today to testify in opposition to the LIHEAP Block Grant proposal.** Under this proposal, **over 85,000 households could lose heating assistance.**

Although I fully understand and appreciate the Governor and the Legislature face difficult choices, I must also emphasize the reality of the difficult choices families across Connecticut face every day in order to make ends meet; in order to make sure their children are well-fed; in order to provide shelter and safety for their loved ones.

As unemployment in Connecticut has remained alarmingly high over the past three years, we have seen more and more middle class families struggle to remain afloat. We have seen middle class families turn to the state for basic needs assistance, something once reserved only for those considered “low income.” And, sadly, we have seen lower-income families who were already facing difficult choices and financial hardship before the recession hit fall even deeper into financial despair as jobs become scarcer and resources become more difficult to access.

Indeed, **Connecticut families are turning to our state’s safety net now more than ever.** Low-income energy assistance is a critical piece of this safety net.

It is for this reason that I **strongly oppose the LIHEAP block grant proposal**. If adopted, this proposal would have devastating consequences for low-income households, including:

- **massive spring utility shut-offs**, endangering the lives and well-being of many low income households and creating significant new burdens with disparate impact on urban areas;
- **endangering well over \$60 million in non-governmental benefits** provided through the utility companies, that make utility bills more affordable for the poor;
- **reduced access to weatherization assistance**, with increased risk that federal stimulus funding for badly needed low income weatherization will have to be returned to the federal government;
- **reversing years of successful efforts** between utility companies and social service providers to create affordable payment programs and a network to make these plans readily accessible to low income households.

Instead, **I urge the Legislature to adopt the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board's (LIEAB) recommendations**, which will:

- **Maintain energy assistance for utility heated households and renters up to 60% SMI**
- **Maintain last winter's program structure and income eligibility levels, with a three-tiered benefit schedule.** Allows the program to modify benefits based on actual federal and potential state-appropriated funds. This means the plan would include benefits for households with income up to 60% SMI, provides benefits regardless of heating sources and includes a benefit for renters.
- **Follow last winter's program time table for benefits** (fuel delivery period: Nov. 1 to and mid-March) **and application deadlines** (Nov. 1 through beginning of May, extended to mid-May for utility heated households with a shut-off notice).
- **Commit state funds to:**
  - **Ensure adequate administrative funding** for Community Action Agencies and other qualified entities to administer the program; and
  - **Supplement federal funds available for energy assistance benefits.**

I urge the Legislature to prioritize basic needs assistance by **rejecting the LIHEAP Block Grant proposal** and instead **adopting the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board's recommendations**.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important program.

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