



**Testimony of Maggie Adair, Executive Director, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance
Before the Energy & Technology, Appropriations and Human Services Committees
Re: Connecticut's LIHEAP Block Grant
September 27, 2011**

The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance wishes to thank the Energy & Technology, Appropriations and Human Services Committees for the opportunity to testify regarding Connecticut LIHEAP Block Grant. The Alliance is a statewide organization of providers, advocates, experts, and community leaders committed to improving the developmental outcomes of all children birth to eight in the areas of early care and education, health, safety, and economic security.

I am Maggie Adair, Executive Director of the Alliance, a position that I took this past June after five years at the Connecticut Association for Human Services. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Alliance because the potential substantial federal cutback in the LIHEAP program will have a negative impact on thousands of low-income children and families in Connecticut.

Families struggling to live without heat in the middle of a harsh New England winter will fall further into poverty and face potential safety issues in their homes. Children who are cold cannot learn and will fall further behind in school, thus contributing to the widening achievement gap. Children who live in an unheated house do not feel safe, do not feel nurtured, and as a result, are enveloped in stress. Research shows that there are negative effects on brain development in young children who live in unsafe homes and are exposed to daily stress. A \$68 million cutback in federal LIHEAP funding for Connecticut will have a long-term negative impact on the future of these children.

The Office of Policy & Management initially proposed allocating heating aid only to those families heating with "deliverable fuel" - oil, propane, coal, or wood. The rationale is that families living in housing heated by gas or electricity will keep their houses heated because by law, the utilities cannot shut off utilities during the cold-weather months, November 1 through May 1. This plan is misguided. It discriminates against families, based on the type of heat they happen to have. Also, if the family cannot pay the heating bills built up over the winter months, once they are dropped by the utility, will they be able to regain service? What happens to their credit rating? How many will risk facing eviction and end up in the shelter system?

News reports suggest that the Administration is coming up with an alternative proposal that would extend heating aid to all customers that qualify, but at a much lower level of funding. OPM says it cannot commit more state funding at this point, but the matter could be revisited



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in February when more will be known about federal funding and Connecticut's revenue situation. The Alliance is encouraged that the Administration listened to concerns and is willing to readjust its position on this issue. We also thank the Governor for sending a letter to Congress urging for full funding of the LIHEAP program.

The newly created State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has been mentioned as a helpful stop-gap for families who face huge cutbacks in heating assistance. The Alliance applauds the Governor for supporting passage of a State EITC for low-wage working families. However, the state EITC should not be looked at as the band-aid to the LIHEAP situation. For one, low-wage working families struggle to make ends meet every day and a state EITC has been desperately needed for years to help them pay the rent and put food on the table. Two, a state EITC does not help people who cannot work – the disabled and elderly.

The Alliance recommends that the Legislature adopt the recommendations of the Low Income Advisory Board.

- Maintain the FFY11 LIHEAP program structure and program eligibility levels; plan for reduced benefits by creating a three-tiered approach to allow the program to modify benefits based on federal and state funding.
- Provide LIHEAP funding to households with income up to 60% SMI, regardless of heating source.
- Follow last year's winter program time table for benefits and application deadlines.
- Commit state funds to ensure adequate administrative funding for Community Action Agencies and other qualified entities to run the program and to supplement federal funds for the overall operation of the Connecticut program.

In the meantime, organizations committed to the well-being of low-income people will work hard to press for adequate LIHEAP funding at the federal level. However, in the absence of adequate federal funding, Connecticut must ensure that our children, families, and elderly do not freeze to death. In the midst of this protracted economic downturn, where Connecticut's poverty rate has increased and more people are jobless, we cannot possibly take actions that will throw people further into increased instability and deeper poverty and further contribute to the widening wealth gap in this state. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical issue.