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**Appropriations Committee Public Hearing - February 15, 2012  
Testimony in Support of Funding for Operation Fuel  
And Year-round Energy Assistance**

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Duff, Representative Hurlburt, Senator Markley, Rep. Miner and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Jennifer Castonguay, I am engaged and have two children. We live in Bristol, CT and I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) in October of 2003. My fiancé is also disabled. We live on fixed incomes from Social Security Disability Insurance. I also work a part-time job to try to "make ends meet".

I am here this evening to thank you for your past support of Operation Fuel and to ask for your support of increasing funds for Operation Fuel by \$2.2 million to insure that more families will have access to year-round energy assistance.

In the past I was eligible for fuel assistance, however since I started working part-time, and one of my qualifying children is now in college, my family is ineligible. The winter fuel assistance that my family had received was invaluable to my family's well-being.

My family and I rent a small home in Bristol. Our home uses electric heat and we have a fireplace so we burn wood to supplement the electric heat. We are on the budget plan with CL&P and even with that our monthly payment is \$290. This past month, the actual cost of our electricity was \$350.

Our hope was that we could use wood to significantly reduce the cost of our electric heating bills. Although it has been a mild winter, we have already used four cords of wood. We have gotten some wood from friends; however a cord of wood costs us \$275.

Given that winter is partly over, you may want to think of summer; however, I am not so excited at its arrival. Please allow me to share some of the difficulties that come from living with MS and what happens in the summer for me. Out of medical necessity, I need to keep my home cool in hot weather.

Heat or high humidity often makes individuals with MS experience a significant worsening of their symptoms. Not only does weather impact me, but daily activities such as taking a hot shower or bath or sitting in a hot tub can trigger the same results. Doctors assert that this "psuedoexacerbation" of symptoms results from the high temperatures causing nerves, whose myelin covering has been damaged or destroyed, to conduct electrical signals even less efficiently than in cooler temperatures.

There is no question that my MS symptoms increase drastically when my body is too warm. In higher temperatures I experience increased weakness, numbness and stiffness in my legs and arms. I suffer more from extreme fatigue, increases in forgetfulness, and decreased attentiveness when my body temperature is elevated. One of the most debilitating results of exposure to extreme heat is an increase in my severe nerve pain. When my nerves flare up in the heat, I experience sensations of sharp stabbing pains throughout my entire body. The unfortunate reality is that any MS symptom can be exacerbated by heat. In some situations, new symptoms present themselves in higher temperatures.

The ability to have access to year-round energy assistance would make a substantial difference in my life and the lives of others for whom air conditioning is not a mere luxury, but a medical necessity. As perplexing a statement as that may be for many of you to understand, cooling truly is a medical necessity for a large percentage of Multiple Sclerosis patients.

In Connecticut, state and federal funds only cover the costs of winter heating for low income residents. There are no government funds available to assist families with keeping the lights on, maintaining hot water for bathing, refrigeration or cooling. Operation Fuel is Connecticut's only source of year-round energy assistance.

Please include increasing funds in the budget for Operation Fuel by \$2.2 million to insure that more families will have access to year-round energy assistance.

Thank you.

Jennifer Castonguay