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Testimony of Shirley Bergert¹ Before the Energy and Technology Committee Regarding H.B. No. 5542

An Act Concerning Consumer Protection for Utility Customers
March 20, 2012

**Recommended action: Support Sections 2 and 4,
providing food replacement in extended outages for low
income families**

Section 2 of this bill provides for electric companies to reimburse very low income families – those eligible for energy assistance or food stamp benefits – for food lost from a lack of refrigeration in a power outage lasting at least 48 hours. The household must prove it suffered a loss before receiving this assistance. The reimbursement is provided as a bill credit, minimizing the utility's administrative expenses. Section 4 provides for the cost to be funded by the systems benefit charge collected under Conn. Gen. Stat. section 16-245/.

Many low income families struggle to afford necessary utility service. Too frequently such families must choose between affording utility services and other necessities such as adequate food, medical care or medicine. When food is lost in an extended power outage, the situation may be untenable. The reimbursement approach in this bill will help mitigate the loss.

Alternate resources to address the loss of food in an outage are unlikely to be available to an impoverished household. Energy assistance is only available for electric bills if the family relies on electric primary heat. Even if a household is electrically heated, energy assistance benefits have been drastically reduced this winter and can't be relied on to mitigate outage related food losses -- benefits this winter range between a total of \$100 and \$395 (compared to \$580 to \$880 last winter).

For more detailed information on the difficulties faced by Connecticut's low income households in affording energy services, see particularly the summary on p. 1-2 of "HOME ENERGY AFFORDABILITY GAP: 2011" prepared by Roger D. Colton, Fisher, Sheehan & Colton, Public Finance and General Economics, December 2011: <http://www.operationfuel.org/publications/>

¹ CT Legal Services represents low income state residents in civil legal matters. Shirley Bergert serves on the Low Income Energy Advisory Board, Energy Conservation Management Board, Fuel Oil Conservation Board, and the Advisory Board for the Institute for Sustainable Energy.