



National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials
Connecticut Chapter
P. O. Box 93
Rockfall, CT 06481
Phone: (860) 508-4896
Fax: (860) 788-2331

www.conn-nahro.org

Public Hearing on Proposed HB 6684

AN ACT CONCERNING A STUDY OF EMERGENCY POWER NEEDS IN PUBLIC HOUSING FOR THE ELDERLY

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My name is Cathy Branch Stebbins and I am the executive director for CONN-NAHRO, the Connecticut Chapter of the National Association of Housing & Redevelopment Officials, the membership association for Connecticut's public housing authorities.

Our membership understands and supports the good intentions of this proposed bill, however, there are many risks and unintended consequences to consider.

Please consider what generators can and cannot do in order to weigh the cost/benefits of this bill. In a single high-rise building, a generator can power a community room for a few days, but it is not possible to run an entire facility. It can possibly keep the lights on in some hallways, it but cannot provide power or heat to the living units. It may help a kitchen staff to make sandwiches and possibly keep one refrigerator running, but it cannot help us continue a usual meal service.

Generators are much less suitable for a duplex, garden-style apartment (which many of our state-sponsored elderly housing units are configured) where there are individual units scattered throughout a complex and where you would have to install, operate and maintain one generator per building. This is a very expensive configuration.

The costs to install and maintain a suitable generator will vary quite dramatically depending upon the size and design of their facilities. These costs can only be estimated on a case-by-case basis and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

You will need to weigh the cost/benefits of trying to heat or cool a common area in public housing when there are fully funded and functional emergency shelters available. It may make more sense to bring people to where there is power and services, versus bringing the power to where there are people and few or no services.

We are also concerned that housing authorities would be expected to become emergency shelters for vulnerable and frail populations. Housing authorities are not properly staffed or funded to care for the complex needs of elderly and disabled people during emergencies. Please keep in mind that the

majority of Connecticut's housing authorities are small and medium sized with a small handful of staff. Sometimes you have a part-time executive director who is also the same person unclogging the kitchen sink in the units. Housing authorities are primarily landlords and not staffed or equipped to deal with the full range of issues, including medical issues, that power outages present to a senior and disabled populations. Some of the individuals living in this housing are on medications that require refrigeration. It is not appropriate to expect a landlord to manage medication issues during emergency situations.

The most responsible, appropriate and cost-effective course of action is to help residents to be reunited with family members or brought to a properly equipped, staffed and funded emergency shelter in an emergency.

We understand this bill proposes a study of this issue but there are 180 different elderly/disabled housing projects in Connecticut that would have to be examined to perform this study. Some of the data that this study is proposing to collect will change daily. Is this a cost-effective utilization of state resources?

We might suggest that instead of a study that you consider providing funding for a competitive grant program that would allow housing authorities to apply when they perceive there is a cost-effective opportunity to install a generator during an opportune time and when they feel they have the capability to manage the risks and challenges that a generator presents.

In summary, the primary concerns of CONN-NAHRO's member housing authorities is:

1. How will the goal be funded, at what cost for what marginal benefit,
2. Would housing authorities be expected to serve as emergency shelters if they had a generator,
3. How would we pay for increased costs of managing an elderly residential population during an emergency which we are not properly trained and staffed for, and
4. What liability would housing authorities be incurring during emergencies?

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Cathy Branch Stebbins