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Appropriations Committee -- Oppose cuts to legal services programs

My name is Margaret Eldridge. I live in Vernon. I am a former Connecticut Legal Services client. I am here to oppose any cuts in SSBG funding to legal service programs.

For over seventeen years I was an EMT (emergency medical technician) and IV tech. I have assisted on Life Star and taught CPR.

One day a patient savagely attacked me, leaving me disabled. I now live on a social security disability income.

In the spring of 2014 for reasons I did not understand, my social security disability benefits were cut by approximately 70% (seventy percent).

When I called the social security administration, the drastic decrease in benefits was not explained to me.

This loss of income was the beginning of an almost instant spiral downward in my life.

I could not pay my monthly bills.

First my cable was shut off.

Next my phone was shut off.

Then came my lights.

To top it off, the State notified me in writing that it had not received paperwork for my Medicaid medical insurance or my food stamps, even though I had sent it in. Those two benefits were terminated.

Things can go bad very quickly.

Within a month or so of my social security benefits being mistakenly cut, I was isolated in my home with no money, no electricity, no food, no phone and no medical coverage.

I became anxious, hungry and pretty desperate.

Because of the expenses associated with owning a car, I had donated my car to the Wounded Warrior Project a few years ago and also had no transportation.

Even though I live within walking distance of a food store, I had no money to buy food.

By using my neighbor's phone I was able to make some calls for help.

Then a Connecticut Legal Services attorney appeared on my doorstep.

I believe in angels and one was sent that day.

Within hours my electricity was restored. Within days the attorney helped to untangle the legal issues to get my social security benefits restored, to get my medical insurance and food stamps activated and to find me a phone I could afford. Since then legal services has helped me apply for other services I need.

I am a strong person and would not have given up, but at best I might only have been able to find fragmented help here or there. Without Connecticut Legal Services I would not have had access to the timely legal help I so needed.

People charged with crimes have access to free lawyers. People like me who have never been charged with a crime are no less in need of legal help when we face a life crisis.

I am at peace now. Though it is not a lot, I have what I need. I am grateful.

It is my hope that legal services will be preserved so that more and more people can be helped in their time of need.