CHAIRPERSONS: Senator Catherine Osten

SENATORS: Abrams, Flexer, Formica, Fonfara, Lesser, Maroney, Miner, Moore, Needleman, Slap Winfield


SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): We’re going to start the public hearing for Monday, August 26, for the block grant allocation plans that are up for review, and we’ll have Deputy Commissioner, Kathleen Brennan, come up to talk about the LIHEAP block grant allocation plan. Deputy Commissioner.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Good morning. Good morning Senator Osten, Moore, Needleman, and Representatives Walker, Abercrombie, Arconti,
Lavielle, Case, and Ferraro, and distinguished members of the Appropriations, Human Services, and Energy and Technology Committees. My name is Kathy Brennan, and I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Social Services. I’m here before you today to seek your approval of the governor’s federal fiscal year 2020 allocation plan for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, LIHEAP, block grant. Before I begin, I just wanted to note since this -- these block grants are administered not only by the department but by our partners in the Community Action Agencies that Charlie Tisdale, former Executive Director at ABCD, for what seemed like forever passed away this past Sunday. I think he was 86 years old. God bless him, but he was -- he was a force to be reckoned with, so I just wanted to express my condolences on behalf of the agency and myself.

So, that was really just a very not a good way to start this. [Laughing]. LIHEAP is administered by the Office of Community Services within HHS, and provides funding to states to assist households with low incomes in meeting their home energy needs. Funds are provided to the state of Connecticut, and they’re administered through my department at the Department of Social Services, through the community services -- Office of Community Services led by Carlene Taylor to my left, who is the manager of that unit. Our program is called CEAP, the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program. We are proud to advocate for the importance and value of CEAP in meeting the heating needs of our elders, people with disabilities, families and children, and we’re grateful for the dedication and commitment of Governor Lamont, the General Assembly, the Office of
Policy and Management, our partners in the Community Action Agencies, local volunteer sites, 211, United Way, Operation Fuel, Connecticut Legal Services, our fuel vendors, and utility companies, and to all the stakeholders for their support and assistance with the program.

We look forward to continuing our work with our partners as we help meet the home heating needs of the state’s most vulnerable households. I’d also like to thank the members of the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board, LIEAB, for their continued support of the program. This year’s plan incorporates recommendations put forward by that group, and has been unanimously endorsed by LIEAB. All of the CAAs began scheduling appointments and accepting applications for the federal fiscal year ’20 program on Thursday, August 1. As of last week, the CAAs had taken over 6000 applications thus far. Following the anticipated adoption of fiscal year ’20 allocation plan by these committees of cognizance and approval by HHS, households that have been preapproved will be officially notified of their eligibility. We remain firmly committed to the early intake process as a way to support overall program efficiency, and will continue to work with our partners to ensure its success.

While the funding level for the operation of CEAP during this federal fiscal year ’20 has yet -- has not yet been released, in order for us to plan for this program in a timely manner, we developed this allocation plan assuming that funding for this program year will be leveled funded through continuing resolutions at the federal fiscal year ’19 program funding level of $75.3 million dollars.
In addition, we have an estimated $6.5 million dollars in fiscal year ’19 carry-forward funds, and an estimated $550,000 dollars in vendor refunds for a total budget of $82.4 million dollars. The estimated budget can be found in section 21 beginning on page 16 of the plan.

Based on our funding level assumptions, we estimate that during fiscal year ’20 program year, we’ll be able to provide $82,035 households with CEAP benefits that are equal to or greater than the benefit levels during federal fiscal year ’19. Households that make direct-to-vendor payments for their heat as well as those households with rental payments that include the cost of their primary heating source may apply for CEAP benefits. Benefits are available to households with incomes up to 60 percent of the state median income or $69,559 dollars for a household of four. Any household in which household members are receiving benefits from the department through TFA, state supplement, or refugee cash are considered to be categorically income eligible for CEAP. In addition to income, there is also a liquid assets test. Households are required to complete and submit an assets declaration form and provide verification of liquid assets which include checking and savings accounts. Liquid asset limit is $15,000 dollars for homeowners and $12,000 for all other households. The asset test doesn’t apply to those utility households and rental assistance households that are categorically eligible or those individuals who are recipients of SSI or DSS programs that have an asset limit that is below the CEAP asset limit.
In addition, if a household exceed the liquid asset limit, they may still be eligible for assistance if the household’s annual gross income when added to the excess limit is within the income guidelines. Applications are taken in person at the CAAs or at intake sites. They can be downloaded from the DSS website and mailed to the CAA with all required supporting affidavits -- I’m sorry -- documentation. Documentation of income and assets have to be verifiable and supported by affidavits. Households are required to fully comply with all reasonable requests for assistance in verifying the documentation.

Basic benefits for CEAP -- there are five basic benefits. I apologize. I think people -- I’m going a little off script from the testimony that you have only because I was trying to condense it, so I do apologize if I’m losing people, so. [Laughing] [Laughter]. Basic benefits -- there are five basic benefit levels. They’re determined based on household income, household size, liquid assets, and vulnerability, and they’re available for all primary sources of heat. The lowest income household, level 1 households, that’s -- that would be a household with a family -- with an income of about 100 percent of -- up to 100 percent of the federal poverty guidelines or $25,750 dollars for a family of four. They receive the highest level of basic benefits. Additionally, basic benefits are divided into vulnerable and nonvulnerable benefit categories. Vulnerable households are those whose members include the elderly, age 60 and older, individuals with disabilities or children under the age of six. Vulnerable households make up nearly 70 percent of our caseload annually. Our proposed basic benefits
range from $340 dollars to $725 dollars, and are detailed in section 8 on page 8 of the plan.

We also level 1 through level 4 eligible deliverable fuel-heated households that have exhausted their basic benefits and are imminent risk of losing eligible heat -- losing heat are eligible also for a one-time crisis assistance benefit of $710 dollars. Level 5 deliverable fuel heated households are eligible for a crisis benefit of $350 dollars. We also have safety net assistance available -- benefits available, which address the needs of deliverable fuel-heated households that have exhausted their basic benefit and their crisis assistance benefit, and they’re in a life-threatening situation, but to ensure those dollars are targeted to the most financially challenged household, we do conduct the risk assessment. If the assessment, which includes a review of their household’s monthly income, their liquid assets, and expenditures, if that determines that they lack sufficient resources to obtain fuel on their own, an emergency fuel delivery up to $515 dollars may be authorized.

Vulnerable deliverable fuel-heated households may be eligible to receive up to three safety net assistance benefits. Nonvulnerable households may be eligible to receive up to two. Households that receive a level 5 basic benefit are not eligible to receive a safety net assistance benefit.

Rental assistance benefits are also available to those households whose heating costs are included in their rent and whose rent is more than 30 percent of their gross income. Those benefits range from $150
to $190 dollars, and also are detailed on page 9 of the allocation plan.

Our allocation plan also talks about conservation services specifically the Weatherization Program. Our CEAP application is also used to determine a household’s income eligibility for the U.S. Department of Energy’s Weatherization Program, which is administered by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, DEEP. The ’20 -- the fiscal year ’20 plan includes an allocation of $550,000 dollars to be transferred from DSS to DEEP to support the provision of weatherization services to CEAP eligible households. We anticipate that $50,000 dollars will be used to support administrative costs, and the remaining $500,000 dollars will be primarily used by DEEP to address health and safety measures necessary to provide the weatherization services to CEAP eligible households. DSS retains oversight for this funding through established reporting requirements and an MOA between DSS and DEEP, and we do work collaboratively.

The plan also proposes to allocate $1.5 million dollars to support the repair and replacement of the heating systems for single family owner occupied like tenant occupied dwellings that are determined to be unsafe, inoperable, and aged or inefficient with obsolete parts. An additional $500,000 dollars in fiscal year ’19 funds has also been obligated to this program resulting in a total of $2 million dollars available through federal fiscal year ’20. These funds will be available to eligible homeowners that receive a level 1 through a level 5 basic benefit. Vulnerable households may also be
prioritized over nonvulnerable households. The plan also includes funds to be provided to eligible fuel households to cover the cost of the clean tune and test of deliverable fuel heating systems for their household’s heating system. This cost will be set aside for heating system -- will be set aside from the funds for heating system repair and replacement component.

The plan also includes an allocation of $1.8 million dollars to continue to provide a $20.01 annual LIHEAP benefit to the SNAP program for the following -- if the household meets the following requirements. Their primary source of heat is included in their rent, they have a shelter and/or utility obligation, and they pay less than 30 percent of their gross income. Receipt of a LIHEAP SNAP benefit qualifies these households to have their SNAP benefits recalculated using the maximum heating/cooling standard utility allowance in accordance with federal SNAP eligibility rules for the entire year. This means they actually end up getting more SNAP benefits.

This plan continues with the fixed margin pricing program described in section 18 on page 14 of the plan. The fixed margin price is based on the daily New Haven rack average oil price information service price for deliveries of ultra-low Sulphur red dye distillate heating oil. As a result of continued savings, the fixed margin price has been increased this year by 2 cents per gallon, and oil vendors will be reimbursed at a margin of 35 cents per gallon above wholesale plus a county differential which will continue to range from 3.3 cents in
Middlesex to 11.5 cents in Fairfield County per gallon.

CAAs are both statutorily and contractually required to pay participating oil and deliverable fuel vendors no later than 30 business days after their receipt of an authorized fuel slip or invoice for payment from the vendor. For fiscal year ’19, 11.3 million gallons of oil were purchased on behalf of energy assistance households and saved an average of 28 cents per gallon for a total savings of $3.1 million dollars over regular retail prices.

Keeping residents informed of energy assistance benefits available to them is a top priority and is accomplished through a variety of methods. DSS maintains a website with up-to-date information for residents and vendors, and we operate an energy assistance hotline. Information about the program is posted on our DSS digital network regional offices, and is also broadcast at the Department of Motor Vehicles in their waiting rooms on their digital communications network. United Way of Connecticut through 211 and its website provides program and contact information for energy assistance intake sites throughout the state, and in order to ensure Connecticut’s most vulnerable residents have access to the LIHEAP resource, we have expanded our mail-in application option ensuring that those folks who are unable to make it into an office can still take advantage of this benefit.

Our CAAs maintain their websites as well as the public utility companies provide informational fliers, and all of these efforts will be maintained to ensure that the public is aware of the benefits
available through this program. We outreach to our participating fuel vendors including an annual meeting to keep them apprised of the program and its changes.

The department thanks our partners for the important role with this energy assistance program. This includes the vital contributions of the extensive network of volunteer intake sites, municipal agents, and senior centers. The efforts by each of these parties are essential to the ongoing success of the program. Again, I’d also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the work of DSS and the Office of Community Services without the support and dedication of this staff led by Carlene Taylor -- we would not be able to successfully operate this program.

Before closing, there are two correctional -- technical corrections to the allocation plan that’s before your review. The subsections under section 5 -- eligibility certifications on pages 6 and 7 were incorrectly lettered. This resulted in inaccurate reference in section 7 -- program integrity -- on page 7. In the second line, the reference to section 5, subsections i and j will be corrected to section 5, subsection i. In addition, the technical term for the heating oil used to calculate the fixed margin price that’s stated in section 18 on page 14 of the plan, will be corrected from low Sulphur red distillate heating oil to ultra-low Sulphur red distillate heating oil. [Laughing].

So, in closing, we join the governor, the Office of Policy and Management in recommending the approval of the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program block grant allocation for federal fiscal year ’20.
Thank you for your review and attention to this matter. My staff and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Thank you very much for that detailed explanation of what we have in front of us -- appreciate it, and I have just a couple of questions that refer to an issue that we had a couple of years ago.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sure.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): So, a couple of years ago we had a group of oil companies -- smaller oil companies that came to us and said, we’re not getting paid.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Uh huh.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Is that the case now or are all oil companies receiving their payment in a timely fashion?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you for that question. All of the oil companies have been paid in a timely fashion. There was a glitch -- was that this year? There was a -- a minor glitch at the start of the year when an -- when in one area where -- I’m going to turn to Carlene who just said -- I explained -- yes. Thank you.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Go ahead. Please introduce yourself.

CARLENE TAYLOR: Good morning. My name is Carlene Taylor. I’m the program administration manager in the Office of Community Services. Deputy Commissioner Brennan is referring to a minor glitch we encountered at the beginning of the year.
What happened was at the beginning of this year we did a survey with our communication action agents as to find out if they were making payments in a timely manner, and we found out that one of our source systems that we use for the energy program -- we have two source systems that we use for the energy program. We have two source systems that we use. One of them we discovered a glitch where if a household received their first delivery from vendor A and then changed their vendor to vendor B and received a second delivery from vendor B before vendor A was paid for their delivery, when that ticket was submitted for payment, it prevented the payment from being processed for vendor A. So, that was a glitch, so that meant that I think we found about 18 payments that were made more than 30 days to be paid because of that glitch. So, once we encountered the glitch, we worked with the program to get it fixed, and that was done, so they had not been any issues since that time.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. And, there were two other issues where an -- directly related to the fact that vendors were not being paid, that the money was being used to support ongoing operational expenditures. Has that issue been resolved?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. In the case down in New Haven that I think you’re referring to --

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Yep.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: What the department did is we engaged with TVCCA, Deb Monahan’s group, down in Norwich, and they actually do the payments now for the New Haven Catchment area. So, those
funds are going directly to the TVCCA. They do the payments. They have an electronic system, and vendors I understand are getting paid within two days of TVCCAs receipt of the authorization.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): And, there was some funds that needed to be repaid.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That’s correct.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): And, has -- and is there a payment plan in process, and is -- are you receiving those payments?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes. There is a payment plan in process, and we are receiving those funds.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): So, that’s starting to eliminate -- it hasn’t completely eliminated what is owed, but it is happening on a regular basis --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: On a monthly basis, yes.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Okay. Great. Thank you very much. Are there any other comments or questions? Representative Lanoue, followed by -- yes.

REP. LANOUE (45TH): Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair. Commissioner, thank you for being with us today. I just have one question -- excuse my ignorance on this. I’m the new man on the block here, so if it’s elementary, forgive me. But you mentioned the asset test -- the asset limit. I’m curious in cases where people are say land rich and cash poor, specifically farmers, where they’re barely making ends meet with income. Would they be
eligible for the -- for this type of assistance -- heating assistance?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, it’s a liquid assets test, so the assets are based on, you know, whether they have checking accounts, saving accounts, CDs, and things of that nature, so if they -- the land does not come into play at all.

REP. LANOUE (45TH): Okay. So, it’s --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, it’s just strictly assets based upon liquid cash and CDs, stocks.

REP. LANOUE (45TH): Okay. And, I --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Things that could be converted to cash.

REP. LANOUE (45TH): I guess -- thank you very much for that answer. I guess one quick followup. Now, say there its should they sell a bunch of dairy or whatever the staple is, they take that money into their account, then they have to immediately pay their expenses that will take money set in the account; is there like a period -- is that -- is that taken into account at all for heating assistance?

CARLENE TAYLOR: First of all, if that farmer is self-employed, there is a different process for providing self-employment documentation of income, so there would be a -- there’s a worksheet that is done to determined based on income and income and expenditures to determine whether that household would be eligible for assistance. In regarding if money comes in and out, it’s based on 30 days prior to the application date of any funds received. In addition, the liquid assets test includes disregard,
so if the household is a homeowner, we disregard the first $15,000 dollars, and any amount over that when added to the annual income, if the household is still eligible -- could still be eligible for receiving services. If the household is a renter, then the disregard is $12,000 dollars.

REP. LANOUE (45TH): I thank you very much for those answers. I appreciate it. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Cheeseman, followed by Representative Abercrombie.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you both for being here today, and I want to thank Senator Osten for her questions with regard to the vendor payments because that was a real concern, and also the ongoing issues, so I’m pleased to hear that that has been resolved. Approximately, how many vendors participate in the program?

CARLENE TAYLOR: There are approximately 350 fuel vendors that participate in the program.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): And, what’s the process if you are a vendor and do want to participate?

CARLENE TAYLOR: If you’re a vendor and do want to participate, then Linette Pisani from my staff who is also here, she oversees that process. There is a vendor document. It’s about six pages long that we send out to all the vendors, which they must complete and send back to our office, and then they are reviewed and put on a list that we provide to the Community Action Agencies, and those are the vendors that can only be used in the program, and that’s also a requirement from HHS.
REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Thank you. And, approximately, how many --

CARLENE TAYLOR: How many?

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): How many clients are served each year by this program?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Well, this past year we had almost 82 -- 82,000 households -- 82,000 households, about a third of them are deliverable fuel heated households. The form that the vendor documents also available on our website that the vendors can download and fill out, and we do send that form out to -- we maintain an email list of all the vendors that participate in the program, so that vendor document is also emailed to them.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): And, are households required to apply again every year?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Yes. They are because we have to verify their income annually.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): And, typically, what’s the turnaround time?

CARLENE TAYLOR: For households applying --

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Yes.

CARLENE TAYLOR: For energy assistance? Forty-five days for the application to be processed by the Community Action Agencies, but most do it less time, especially if the household needs a fuel delivery.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Right. And, you said about a third are receiving this fuel heating assistance. What -- what are the --
CARLENE TAYLOR: They are deliverable fuel heated households.


CARLENE TAYLOR: The rest are --

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): The other -- the other two-thirds is --

CARLENE TAYLOR: Mostly they are utility heated households with a small household with their heat included in their rent.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): So, that would be -- so if you’re heating your home with electricity, it would apply to those households?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Yes.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): All right. Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Abercrombie, followed by Senator Formica.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning. Thank you for being here. Just a couple of quick questions. So, the carryover for the LIHEAP is about $6.5 million dollars. Can you tell me how you came up with that amount?

CARLENE TAYLOR: That amount is based on funds that we anticipate will remain unspent at the end of federal fiscal year 2019. Most of those funds are funds that were allocated for the safety net assistance program that -- but we have ended up spending less dollars because the weather was not as severe as one might anticipate, so as a result of that, we have those funds carry forward. Others
might be sometimes we have a little of, unfortunately, DSS admin money that’s unspent, so that’s included in the carry forward also.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, can you give the definition of safety net? Who qualifies for that when -- when those dollars are used?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Safety net assistance are for deliverable fuel heated households only because utility-heated households are protected from not being -- having their services disconnected from November 1 to May 1. Those households must have been eligible for energy assistance up to level four -- one through four, must have exhausted their basic and crisis assistance benefits and are still in need of fuel, considered to be in a life-threatening situation. A risk assessment is done for those households, and most households don’t need to come into to do that part of the program because we have that information and the agencies on their -- in their source system they can press a button and a calculation is done to determine whether that household would still qualify for safety net assistance. If it’s determined that that household has more than $1000 dollars in available funds, they do not -- they’re not eligible for the safety net because that’s considered to be sufficient funds to obtain a fuel delivery.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, have we increased the amount that we give to our vendors? The oil vendors?

CARLENE TAYLOR: You mean the two cent margin that -- we do not anticipate that it will make a difference so much in -- in terms of whether we will
have sufficient funds to provide that benefit or not because looking at what we spent last year, we think we have sufficient funds to provide that transfer.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, then one final question, if I may, Madam Chair? The triennial monitoring system; can you talk about that a little bit and what changes you have made with what’s been going on with a couple of the CAAs over the last couple of years?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thanks for that question. To be honest, that’s related more to the CSBG role, so I don’t know. The triennial monitoring is part of the CSBG block grant, so I don’t know if you want to go into that now, or.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): No. I’ll wait until we do that portion.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you very much. Senator Formica, followed by Representative Ferraro.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you, Madam Chair, and good morning.

DEPUTY SPEAKER BRENNAN: Good morning.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Good morning to you. Thank you.

DEPUTY SPEAKER BRENNAN: Thank you.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Summer’s ending quickly; isn’t it?
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: It is.

Senator Formica (20th): With regard to the carry forward number and the vendor refunds, thank you to the good Representative for clarifying that. Does that carry forward specifically go to the safety net then, or is it available for within other areas of the program?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: It’s available through other -- [Crosstalk]

Senator Formica (20th): It’s part of the cash available?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: Yeah. And, actually, what’s helpful by us having that carry forward is sometimes the federal dollars come in late. If we’re not getting the award until October, November, and fuel deliveries start November 13. By us having those dollars available since we carry them forward, we get to be able to give the money to CAAs to get the money out to the oil vendors, so it’s a little bit of our own safety net having that carry forward fund.

Senator Formica (20th): Yeah, acts as a bridge. And the vendor refunds; what does that refer to?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: So, in utility heated households sometimes we don’t know that a person has moved, and so they -- the -- we send the benefit, and when the utility companies look, they can’t match it up. They have to send the money back to us.

Senator Formica (20th): Thank you. And, with regard to the payments for New Haven that we talked
about at one point, I believe, TVCCA was making those payments, or?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That’s correct.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): They’re making them just for TVCCA and the New Haven facility, not the entire system; correct?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: That’s correct.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): And, are they still continuing to do so?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: They are.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you. And, then the transfer to DEEP for $550,000 --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): To help them get over their little hump, I guess, includes $50,000 for admin costs? Is that to fund a staff person that is new or does that all go to DEEP for their decision, or?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yeah. I am -- I am not 100 percent sure. I know it’s for administrative costs. I think DEEP is going to be testifying after us, so they’ll probably clarify. [Off mic conversing].

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): I’m sorry. I had my mic off. Thirty-five cents over wholesale. There was some concern about the fairness of that wholesale number as I recall a year or two ago, and then the differential. Are we seeing any issues or problems with differential numbers and wholesale accountability this time?
CARLENE TAYLOR: So, we have not been informed of any concerns or issues of that.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): I’m sorry. I didn’t quite hear you.

CARLENE TAYLOR? We have not been informed of any concerns or issues regarding that pricing.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Great. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time and your good service. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Ferraro, followed by Representative Lavielle.

REP. FERRARO (117TH): Thank you. [Clearing throat]. Thank you, Madam Chair. And, thank you very much for your detailed explanation --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

REP. FERRARO (117TH): Of the benefits available. I just have a more of a macro question that I was just curious about. I noticed that -- and the previous Representative talked about -- the number of households being serviced -- 82,000 households. What are the total number of households in Connecticut? Do you know?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I do not. I -- I don’t. We can try to find that for you, and --

REP. FERRARO (117TH): Okay. I was hoping to get that, but only because I’m just curious as to how does Connecticut match up with other cold-weather states with regards to the percentage of households that we service. Is it possible to get that information?
REPRESENTATIVE FERRARO (117TH): I would appreciate it if you would either forward it to my legislative assistant --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Absolutely.

REPRESENTATIVE FERRARO (117TH): Or to this committee -- the Energy Technology Committee.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): So, all information will go through the --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: The Census.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Yes. Please. So, that it can get out to everybody, so that when we’re answering questions, we’re answering it to everybody. Thank you.

REPRESENTATIVE FERRARO (117TH): I appreciate that, Madam Chair, and thank you very much.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.


DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: [Laughing].

REPRESENTATIVE FERRARO (117TH): So --

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): That’s just a quick Google search.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: [Laughing].

REPRESENTATIVE FERRARO (117TH): So, then we’re looking at six or seven percent, and I’d just like to know if that
figure is consistent with other cold-weather states. Thank you -- thank you very much.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Representative Lavielle, followed by Representative Gresko.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Good morning.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): I’m over here. I’m --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: There you are.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): I’m right here. [Laughing]. Yeah. It’s a little hard to see over Representative Lanoue.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: [Laughing].

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): In any case, just a short question. Do you have a feeling yet as to -- since the funding is remaining approximately level -- do you have a feeling as to the number of eligible households that might be preparing to apply?

CARLENE TAYLOR: We have estimated that the number of eligible households will be a little over 82,000 households. Usually, about ten percent of the households that apply annually are not determined to be eligible, so I would think ten percent was 82, that’s a total number that will apply for the program.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Well, yes --

CARLENE TAYLOR: But we -- we expect about 82,000 households.
REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): But by comparison to last year, is that more, less?

CARLENE TAYLOR: We’re expecting an increase over last year. A slight increase over last year.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Slight increase. By -- by about how much?

CARLENE TAYLOR: About one to two percent. We have noticed -- actually, this past year was our first increase in about four years, so we anticipate that the trend will continue.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): So, is -- do you have any view as to whether that’s, I guess, an economic thing or is it weather conditions, or any influence?

CARLENE TAYLOR: I think it’s a combination of everything, and also other states I’ve also seen that slight decline over a number of households applying, so I think we were one of few states that actually saw an increase over this past year.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): So, when you have a 22 percent increase in households and level funding --

CARLENE TAYLOR: Two percent -- one to two percent.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Oh, I’m sorry. [Laughing].

CARLENE TAYLOR: [Laughing].

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): I was -- I was really alarmed when you -- [Laughing]. Well, that makes me feel better. So, well, does the one to two percent increase -- goodness -- does that -- does -- does that have any impact on the allocation of funds that’s discernable with level pay?
CARLENE TAYLOR: We do not think so. When we developed the plan, we took into account that increase that we could possibly see.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Gresko, followed by Representative McCarty.

REP. GRESKO (121ST): Thank you, Madam Chair. What’s the deadline for submitting your application?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: It’s rolling. Throughout the entire program year, individuals can continue to apply.

REP. GRESKO (121ST): So, it’s a -- well, go ahead.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Go ahead.

CARLENE TAYLOR: We actually start taking applications May 1 of each -- the program -- we start to taking applications August 1, and then we take applications until May 1 or May 15 if that household uses a utility as their primary heat and they have a shut-off notice or have been disconnected and have not applied previously.

REP. GRESKO (121ST): So, there isn’t a first-come-first-serve kind of thing where as if I’m in the process of getting my application either approved or disapproved and someone comes in with critical needs, I don’t get bumped?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Well, most of the -- the program services are really provided from November to May, so by that time, most of the households would have applied already for energy assistance. Who we see coming in, in May, are households who use the
utility as their primary heat and for some reason had not applied for the program during the winter?

REP. GRESKO (121ST): I know you said that we were increasing by a percent -- 2 percent this year -- but is there a waiting list or is there just you’re eligible or ineligible?

CARLENE TAYLOR: We have not had a waiting list per se. Households come in and apply, and then there is a number of days that it takes for the applications to process. I don’t recall the last time we had to stop taking applications because we ran out of funds.

REP. GRESKO (121ST): Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you very much. Representative McCarty, followed by Representative Meskers.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. And, good morning and welcome. I just have two quick questions. One to deal with the conservation and the weatherization program. Perhaps, that will go to DEEP, but you mention in your testimony that it still is under the DSS oversight, and you mention that there are other uses of the weatherization program funding that may go to other uses, and could you just clarify that a bit. I know you mentioned the health and safety, but some of the funding may go to other uses?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, the weatherization piece that is between us and DEEP for the weatherization program is a small piece of their overall budget and program, which you’ll hear about. The -- our allocation plan in addition to the
weatherization dollars that we give -- we have money for clean, tune, and test, and for home heating repair and replacement, which is actually something that helps the weatherization program. An individual home that has, you know, a heating system that is inoperable or old or inefficient, they can get funds to help support improving that in order to be then eligible for the weatherization program.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): If I may continue for a moment? So, that led me to the next that was about the home repair and replacement program. That’s a relatively new program, I believe? But that’s -- that’s a question.

CARLENE TAYLOR: It’s been about four years. We used to have the program, but then when we received weatherization stimulus funds, we suspended it for that period because the amount of dollars that were available to provide those services. After that program was over, then we reinstated it using LIHEAP funds.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Thank you. But that program -- is there any way or do you have a mechanism to track at all -- so those single -- there are single homes, I believe, owner or life tenant households -- do you have anything in place that could track what the savings might be for those particular households after they do the repair work or the installation of new, whatever, furnace?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Not currently, but that’s something we can look into tracking to see if there is a difference in usage consumption after the installation of that heating system.
REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Okay. That would be very, I think, useful information. Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Representative Meskers, followed by Representative Walker.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Apologies for my late arrival. A question. I’m not sure the topic was covered before I arrived, in which case, I’ll review the recording of the meeting. Question’s related to the 350 -- I believe you mentioned -- energy providers that are your group. Is there an active course of review on pricing and how the energy is distributed? Having said, you know, sitting on Energy and Technology, I’m a little concerned about third-party vendors and what the pricing variances that you allow within the program to make sure that we’re efficiently using the resources that are coming in as a block grant.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, we set the price for the oil on a daily basis, and then the 35 cents is what is given -- goes to the deliverable fuel vendors, you know, for the -- for the delivery. There is a county differential that ranges from 3.3 to 11.5, and that varies depending on the county and you know, how much further they have to go in order to deliver the oil.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): So, you’re comfortable on the oil side that you’re in control of the pricing, and on -- on some of the heating is electric heating as well I assume, and how -- how do you control the variance there because I’m a little concerned with third-party vendors, particular in the electric industry? Is there any review of that?
CARLENE TAYLOR: Okay. For households that use electricity as their primary heat source, they’re eligible for basic benefit, and it’s based on the income level and vulnerability, etc., and that payment is sent directly to the utility company for that household.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): But those could be any of the various electric energy providers in the state, right?

CARLENE TAYLOR: It’s synced to the investor-owned utility companies --

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Right.

CARLENE TAYLOR: Plus, the municipalities.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): And -- and is there any review of the -- of the electric energy charges, per se and setting bases there?

CARLENE TAYLOR: We don’t because whatever the benefit is sent to the utility company, and then they apply that benefit to the household’s account.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Sorry. I’ll leave after this. Just my concern is that in the electric utility industry the variances have been as high as 20 percent versus the standard utility rates, so I’d hope at some point in the future we’d look towards a review to make sure -- I’m not sure whether that’s material in terms of the amount of electric you use in heating. Maybe it’s not a big issue for you, but I would be concerned about any overage surcharges on the electric side.

CARLENE TAYLOR: I was just mentioning to the Deputy that it’s in statute that the basic benefit has to
be the same across all heat times whether it’s a deliverable fuel or natural gas or electric, so whatever that basic benefit is, we can’t make a change based on what is -- what the pattern is regarding consumption usage of electric-heated households.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): No, but you monitor the cost of the diesel or the fuel-based, but it doesn’t sound like you monitor the cost on the electric side.

CARLENE TAYLOR: We monitor for the -- the deliverable-fuel heated households because that’s how we base the pricing --

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Yeah.

CARLENE TAYLOR: On the delivery being made.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): So, this would give rise to concern on my part, but thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Kokoruda, followed by Representative Mastrofrancesco.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): Thank you, Madam Chairman. Thank you for your presentation. Just a couple two questions. With all the energy assistance, do you know what percentage of households that are receiving it are senior citizens in our state?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Over 78 percent of our caseload is vulnerable -- to vulnerable households, and that is a household that would have someone age 60 and older. So, it’s about 31,000 of -- to be -- of elderly to be --
REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): Of the about 82,000; is that what you said?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yeah.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): The 30—

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yeah.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): Okay. And, my other question is just reading your report when you talk about the SNAP benefits and you’re talking about these -- the $1.8 million dollars that’s allocated for -- for people to get $20.01 a year, that’s about 90,000 households. What is the cost to administer them getting $20 dollars a year?

CARLENE TAYLOR: That benefit is administered by DSS. Households don’t apply for that benefit. That’s an automatic run that’s done through the system to households receiving SNAP benefits where they are not responsible for paying for their heat and their rent is less than 30 percent of their income.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): So, this is just tagged onto another -- some other benefit they’re getting, so it’s not like it’s 90,000 checks going out?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Correct.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): Okay.

CARLENE TAYLOR: No. The running is done, and it’s on their card.

REP. KOKORUDA (101ST): Okay. Okay. All right. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Mastrofrancesco.
REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for being here today. Just -- just a quick question, if I understand correctly. I’m just gonna use electricity for an example. They’re on energy assistance, and I believe they pay a set amount every month. Is that correct?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: No. They -- we -- we give a benefit. The -- that’s the benefit that gets paid every month.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Correct. I’m seeing the homeowner --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: I’m -- I’m -- one benefit. I’m sorry. One benefit.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Or the renter pays probably a flat fee to the electric company based on a discount through the state that’s subsidizing the -- the remaining; is that correct?

CARLENE TAYLOR: There is -- the benefit -- the LIHEAP benefit is just one benefit. However, the utility -- the investor-owned utility companies have a matching payment program, which benefits households that receive a LIHEAP -- a LIHEAP or CEAP benefit where that benefit plus any payments made can be matched by the utility company to reduce their arrearages.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): And, is the match through the state? The state reimburses the utility company?

CARLENE TAYLOR: No. The match is done by the utility company. The household just has to be eligible for LIHEAP benefit and must have also made
payments on their own during a certain period of time.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): So -- so the recipients on the energy assistance program pay nothing at all; is that correct?

CARLENE TAYLOR: No. They are responsible to make a payment during that period.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Okay.

CARLENE TAYLOR: And, if they’re successful, then the LIHEAP benefit plus their payments are matched by the utility company.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Right. So, if for some reason during that course of time, they lapse and they did not make a payment and they did get a shut-off notice, what happens?

CARLENE TAYLOR: Sometimes the utility company will work with them, but if they default on making that payment, even though they may have been eligible for the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program and the benefits sent to the utility company, that match would not be made.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): And, would they lose all of the prior? Would they have to reimburse the electric company the full amount or does the state --

CARLENE TAYLOR: It’s just that they would --

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Have to pay up until that point?

CARLENE TAYLOR: It’s just that if they did not fulfil their agreement with the utility company the
match would not be made, and they would be then responsible for whatever charges, you know consumption charges they had during that period of time. It’s just a way to help households reduce their arrearages, but they have to be successful at it.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): So, I’m just a little confused. So, the -- so the -- we reimburse the electric company; correct?

CARLENE TAYLOR: We send them a benefit payment.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): You send them a benefit payment. Correct.

CARLENE TAYLOR: Yeah.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): And, somebody doesn’t make their payment --

CARLENE TAYLOR: They still get the benefit payment.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Okay. The electric --

CARLENE TAYLOR: However, they were not successful on their part for making their payments, and therefore, no match will be made against the benefit that we sent to the utility company.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): So, the consumer doesn’t have to repay back --

CARLENE TAYLOR: No.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): The --

CARLENE TAYLOR: No.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Funds?

CARLENE TAYLOR: The benefit. No.
REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Okay. Thank you for clarifying that. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Walker.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Thank you. And, thank you -- thank you for your testimony. I just want to continue on that conversation 'cause I think we sort of -- once I’ve been declared a vulnerable household and I apply for electricity, if I miss a payment in the -- that time period from November 1 to May 1, my electricity cannot be interrupted; correct?

CARLENE TAYLOR: That is correct.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Okay. ‘Cause I think I kind of missed that -- that part of the conversation. Statutorily, that’s already established. Okay. I just want to make -- now, the other question. You said that we had about 82,000 people that received services last year; correct?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yeah. Just about. It was 81,456 it was I think from last year. We’re estimating about 82,235 this year.

REP. WALKER (93RD): And, the time period that I was allowed to apply was from what date last year?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: August 1.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Was it from August 1.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Always August 1.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Okay.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And, then we actually extended it to May 15. It’s usually May 1 it ends.
REP. WALKER (93RD): Right.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: So, but we extended it to --

REP. WALKER (93RD): But the Community Action Agencies can collect those applications currently.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: They are collecting them. Yes.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Before August 1?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: No. They started August 1.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Oh, they started August 1.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: They started August 1, and then since August 1, they’ve taken over 1000 applications. Fuel delivery doesn’t start until --

REP. WALKER (93RD): November.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: November 13, and obviously, this time of year, it’s still covered by last year’s program, right, so.

REP. WALKER (93RD): So, do you anticipate -- and I -- the reason why I’m asking is because I thought I heard you say that you anticipated that there were going to be more. That the number of households might increase slightly this year, and you’re basing that on poverty levels or on something else? I’m just curious.

CARLENE TAYLOR: We’re basing it on trends, that we noticed last year we had an increase of about 1 percent.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Okay.
CARLENE TAYLOR: So, we anticipate that will continue.

REP. WALKER (93RD): Okay. So, you built in that aspect. Okay. All right. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Are there any other questions? I’m seeing none. Thank you very much.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Next up is Deputy Commissioner Victoria Hackett from Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Good morning.

VICTORIA HACKETT: Good morning. Victoria Hackett and with me is Michael Li our brand-new Bureau Chief at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Thank you to the committee chairs and members for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the federal fiscal year 2020 allocation plan for the LIHEAP block grant. I’m Vicky Hackett. I’m Deputy Commissioner of Energy at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Michael and I are both very new to our positions at DEEP, but we’re grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today in support of the plan, and we’ll answer all the questions that we can, and we may have to follow up with some answers if there’s something that’s outside what we’ve been briefed on.

DEEP supports the federal fiscal year 2020 LIHEAP allocation plan and specifically, the $550,000-dollar grant for home health and safety barrier removal that DEEP has overseen for the last two years. This is the same amount at the grant from last year’s federal fiscal year ’19 LIHEAP
DEEP manages this grant as a compliment to the federal weatherization assistance or WAP program that DEEP administers through funding from a different source from the U.S. Department of Energy. The LIHEAP managed by DEEP allows limited-income residents in Connecticut to have no -- to have access to no-cost health and safety barrier removal that would otherwise prevent those households from receiving weatherization services through the WAP program. Weatherization is one of the best ways to help limited-income customers save money on their energy bills. However, health and safety barriers such as asbestos, knob and tube wiring, mold growth, or -- or water conditions that you often find in older housing stock often prevents the installation of weatherization measures. This LIHEAP grant to DEEP allows those barriers to be addressed so that we can proceed with the weatherization under the WAP program. Most low-income residents cannot afford expensive removal and replacement procedures necessary to address these issues that prevent their homes from being weatherized. DEEP’s approach to comprehensive health and safety barrier identification and removal is aligned with the most recent Department of Energy standards, regulations, and training to address indoor air quality, mold, and moisture issues, radon, injury prevention, and electrical safety issues through a single program.

Greater weatherization of these homes also helps LIHEAP energy assistance dollars go further and reduces the energy need in future years. Energy expenses including electric utility bills, delivered heating oil, or natural gas are considered unaffordable if they represent more than 6 percent
of household income. We know that many Connecticut limited-income households regularly pay more than that. Access to weatherization programs to reduce household energy costs is one critical way to reduce the percentage of household income necessary to cover energy expenses.

In my position as we move to a clean power grid and advanced renewable thermal options, one of my primary responsibilities is to partner with others to find ways to mitigate the unaffordability of energy for our most vulnerable residents. I take that responsibility very seriously. I’m so proud of our team at DEEP who have worked hard to launch this program to address a significant hurdle in program accessibility for the limited-income population. There have been bumps in the road since 2017 when DEEP started developing this program, but our team is motivated to learn from that experience and to make this program a success. DEEP also supports the LIHEAP plans allocation of funds for emergency repair and replacement of unsafe, inoperable, old inefficient heating equipment with high efficiency furnaces, boilers, heat pumps or other heating and water heating equipment as delivered by the local LIHEAP agencies. We appreciate the Department of Social Services continued use of a protocol to ensure that the high efficiency equipment is installed when such emergency repairs or replacements are made because this will help reduce the energy burden of low-income residents and make future LIHEAP dollars stretch further.

In summary, DEEP supports this year’s plan and looks forward to working with the Department of Social Services, Community Action Groups, all of you and
others -- other stakeholders to ensure that residents benefit from this important integration of public health, human services, and energy savings goals. The investment in this year’s plan is an important step to integrating energy management services that close the energy affordability gap. Making energy efficiency upgrades in low-income households in an integrated way ensures that LIHEAP dollars will be spent more efficiently in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you, and I look forward to working with you all in this new role, and I welcome your questions.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you very much, and congratulations on your new positions. Senator Formica, followed by Representative Cheeseman.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Good morning.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): And, welcome. You may have heard my question earlier to the commissioner, and I think you may have referred to it when you opened your statement, but the $50,000 dollars of the $550,000; does that refer to a staff person or can you outline the administrative cost to that either now or in the future?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Sure. My understanding is that we split that administrative cost with the Community Action Group that provides the servicing. It does not cover the -- the amount that we retain doesn’t really come close to covering the staff that we have assigned to it, but that’s -- that’s my understanding.
SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): So, you just kind of put it toward whatever cost goes for the overall?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right. Yeah.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Okay. And, when these H & S barriers are identified, does that mean when they’re fixed with some of these dollars they proceed automatically to the next step where they get the -- the services?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. Absolutely. They’re required once they receive the health and safety measures to then receive the weatherization services. Sometimes there is a gap in time there because it can take a while to address the health and safety measures. There is construction involved and depending on the issue, it can be somewhat complex, and then we have to get the weatherization measures installed, which can also take some time, so they’re not always done in the same fiscal year.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you. And, lastly, those weatherization upgrades or repairs are they bid out to private contractors or are they done --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: I’m not sure I know the answer. Do you know how the contracting is?

MICHAEL LI: Hi. Michael Li, Energy Bureau Chief for DEEP. I believe that they are bid out to the contractors, but we’ll send you that information.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yeah.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Wonderful. Thank you very much. Thank you for your answers.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yeah.
SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Cheeseman, followed by Representative Abercrombie.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Getting back to the -- I’m over here.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Sorry. [Laughing].

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): In this big room, it’s hard to spot people.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yeah.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): So, how does a household apply for weatherization, energy efficiency, the benefits provided by the program you’re administering?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: My understanding is that they -- they -- the application begins when they first apply for assistance under the LIHEAP program, and that sort of creates a lead that then flows through.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Does it require affirmative action on their part or -- I’m trying to find -- so, I -- I apply for let’s say fuel assistance, and absent the, you know, vendor coming in and looking at my furnace and saying oh sharp intake of breath, you’ve got a problem here; how -- how do you then take that -- that one step further -- I’ve got a really old boiler, I need some help? I’m just curious as to how the process works.

MICHAEL LI: So, what happens is when they apply for LIHEAP and there is a referral made, and then the Community Action Agency will then follow up with that household to discuss with them weatherization.
REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): So, there are in theory 82,000 conversations going on? I’m obviously -- energy efficiency and upgrades are one of the best ways -- one to stretch your energy dollar, you know reduce all those. It’s the most cost-effective way to really solve so many problems, and I’m just curious as to how this process happens?

MICHAEL LI: We’ll have to get back to you on that.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Okay.

MICHAEL LI: I don’t have any more information than that at this time.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Right. And, I getting back to a question that Representative McCarty -- McCarty asked before -- with regard to once you’ve made the energy upgrades tracking those improvements, reductions in energy use, and I see in the document provided low-income energy assistance there’s a section that talks about performance measures, and it states, as required by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services the department will collect energy consumption information for vendors -- from vendors for households eligible for CEAP. This data will be used to compute energy burden of households for saving assistance, and will allow the state to better focus future energy benefits. So, the data needs to be collected. Which departments responsibility is it? Is it Department of Social Services responsibility? So, it’s your responsibility? They’re shaking their heads behind you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: [Laughing].

[Laughter].
REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): I’m glad to hear that.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. Yes. [Laughter].

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): So, just that -- just that then get passed on to you at DEEP. I mean I’m just -- you know, we know that you’ve made improvements, they’ve reduced their energy burden. I just want to make sure there’s -- there’s a flow of information going on.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. That’s a great question, and I think, you know, that’s the type of thing that as we work collaboratively moving forward, I think, you know, we’ll be doing a lot of that type of information sharing, so yes. Because I’d be interested in that as well.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Yeah. Because obviously, the more efficient the energy use, you know, the better everything like that.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yeah.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): They’re using less energy, which frees up more money to help those people who need more, and it just piggybacking on Senator Formica’s question -- so, you’re going to get back to us as to how the vendors -- I wondered if they were the ones that are currently in the energy efficiency part where you know you can get your free inspection, if it’s the same sort of group of people --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Which would seem to make sense, but things don’t always make sense, so.
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Thank you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. We will provide that.


DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: So, you’re asking about the utility run program?

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Yes. Yes. Thank you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: All right. Thank you.

REP. CHEESEMAN (37TH): Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Abercrombie, followed by Representative Meskers.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Thank you, Madam Chair. So --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: [Laughing].

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): I know it’s hard to see where everybody is. So, following up on the two programs, so we’re talking currently about the LIHEAP program, which comes from the Department of Health and Human Services that is a compliment to the WAP program, which is the Weatherization Assistance Program, which comes from the U.S. Department of Energy.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): When we did the transfer of the weatherization LIHEAP to DEEP back in 2017, since then, we’ve had some bumps in the road.
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And because of that we’ve had some issues with our CAAs because of that bump in the road. I’m hoping that you can talk a little bit about -- and I know you’re both new to this, so I appreciate that -- but I hope that you can talk a little bit to some of the changes that you’re currently going to make around this program to ensure that these dollars are being spent for these programs, especially onto the LIHEAP. And, also, what I would like to do is also request that six months into this program this year that we get a report saying where we are on the LIHEAP dollars under this program, but if you want to talk a little bit to what you see and some of the issues were since 2017, and how you will be -- how you will be making some changes. That would be great.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. I’d be happy to do that. So, 2017, I think was our sort of the first year that we were -- that LIHEAP money was being allocated to health and safety initiatives to try -- so you have these two separate programs. There’s the WAP program, and then there’s the Health and Safety Program through the LIHEAP dollars, and they’re coming from separate funding sources, but then we have to sort of mesh them together because people are referred into the WAP program, and then the vendors go into the house, and they see uh oh there’s a health and safety measure that needs to be addressed, and we cannot move forward with this weatherization initiative, so then, that’s where the LIHEAP health and safety measures come in, and so then they feed and they funnel into that program.
So, in 2017, that’s when we first started using these dollars to assist with removing those health and safety barriers in order to enable -- further enable the WAP program. So, the first year my understanding is was sort of like a planning year, you know, getting the MOU together with DAS and that sort of thing, and then my understanding is 2018 we had a relatively successful launch year but learning from our experiences along the way. We did have a problem in the 2019 federal fiscal year because there was a delay in the DOE contract on weatherization, and I think Michael can talk a little bit more about that because he -- he just came from DOE actually, but that delay in the weatherization program contract between us, DEEP, and DOE caused a delay; therefore, in the health and safety program with the LIHEAP dollars. So, unfortunately, that had an impact on our spend in 2019, and what we’ve done to address that is we got way further out ahead of that contract this year, and so because the LIHEAP health and safety program is on the federal fiscal year and begins in October, we’re gonna have that contract in place this fall, so it should not cause the same kind of delay that was caused last year that’s really largely, I think, responsible for our -- our failure to hit the -- the budget amount this year.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, what is the timeline that these vendors get paid after this work is done?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: I think that depending on whether we have all of the information from the vendor. There was a little bit of delay last year when we were waiting for the contract to be ironed out, but we’ve been doing much better, and most of
them are getting done within 30 days, if not sooner. I think I saw some that were even like seven or eight days, so I think we’ve been -- we’ve been really fairly successful in increasing the speed with which we do reimbursements.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And the time --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: When we get all -- I’m sorry to interrupt -- but when we get all of the information that we need. There have been a couple of payments that you know we have some responsibility for being delayed on just because of our staffing and -- our staff was so focused on that DOE contract and trying to get that done, that I think there were a couple of delays during that time, but for the most part, we’re within 30 days when we have all the information we need.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, then are both of these programs on the same fiscal period timelines?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: They’re not, which does cause a little bit of confusion as well, so the LIHEAP program is on the federal fiscal year.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, how about reporting back to us within six months about the weatherization. Would your agency be okay with that?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Absolutely. And, we’d be happy to meet again, you know, whatever it is --

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Yeah, because I think --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: We can provide whatever you’re looking for.
REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Yeah, because I think I -- I’d rather know ahead of time if there are --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Sure.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Some flaws in the system than to be behind the eight ball, which I feel has been transpiring over the last couple of years, and then again this would all go through our Madam Administrator, Sue King [phonetic], so that everyone on all three committees --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yeah.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Would have the same information to look at. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Rs Meskers, followed by Representative Buckbee.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): I want to thank you for the work you do. Obviously, it’s of extreme importance to people in need. I just want to reiterate the comments I made previously that I’m not hearing from any of you that there is a baseline contract rate for like electric energy; and therefore, the margins that are getting charged in the passthrough is not subject of the same regulation that I’m hearing on heating fuel, so I’m concerned whether or not we’re paying surcharges that are in excess of reasonable surcharges to various vendors, so I’d want us to work on establishing a baseline price for electric energy such that the aid that we are either passing through or coming directly from the state only has a reasonable margin to it because I think we defeat part of our purpose of we allow surcharges through, and they drain the system of the resources available.
to help the most vulnerable, so I’d ask for some help on that.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Absolutely. And, I -- and I heard your question, and I’m not sure if you -- if you are aware, but we can provide details for you. There’s actually an ongoing docket that could help address this at PURA currently where they’re looking at by statute that PURA was given the ability to study whether -- whether limited income rate pairs -- to hardship customers I think is how they refer to them -- should be transferred to the standard service or you know, or whether something else could be done like that.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): But the bottom line is we -- whether it’s private or public -- or public regulated utilities, we have no baseline right now on electricity; whereas we have baseline established for heating oil.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): So, we know what the profit margins are and we can control that; whereas, here it doesn’t sound like we have any control. Am I right?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: I think the comparison point would probably be the standard service rate.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Okay. But it’s not currently used as a baseline?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: It’s not -- there’s not currently -- right.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Okay.
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: So -- so people who are considered hardship customers by the utilities people who are receiving these services, to my understanding, there’s -- there’s nothing preventing them from being on a higher rate from an electric supplier with us.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): And, theoretically, a 10 or 20 percent surcharge --

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): So --

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Thank you. Sorry.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): I just want to make sure that we’re all asking the questions. So, the agencies that are responsible for that -- so the agency that’s responsible for that is DSS, and they’re -- and on the price of the -- that we’re paying for fuel and other things that comes out of what we’re paying for the -- to the utility companies, so I understand what your comments are, and we’ll see if we can work on that over the next legislative session.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Buckbee, followed by Representative Nolan.

REP. BUCKBEE (67TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning, still. [Laughing].

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Good morning.

REP. BUCKBEE (67TH): My question falls more under where Representative Cheeseman was before, for efficiency on the vendors, so I guess my question comes from a constituent who called and spoke with someone at DEEP, who asked about -- they wanted a
new -- they needed a new furnace and hot water heater wasn’t efficient in their home, and there was a question about sharing the vendors -- how many vendors were available for them to pick from and who they could talk to, which I thought was a mild concern, but the prices that were given were higher than when she went out to the market herself to the area of $15,000 dollars here to $10,000 dollars here, and she said, I’m scraping to start with, and is there any vending process I guess is my question to what their pricing would be on your end to know that those vendors are actually offering a savings and not just onboard to try to get more business?

MICHAEL LI: I don’t have the full answer to your question, but what happens is once the Community Action Agency goes in and does the audit, identifies all the measures, they pull -- put together a package of all -- these are all the things we need to do in the house, and then that comes back to our office, and then we have to approve the scope of work essentially before they can go back out and install those measures, but I’ll have to get back to you about do we do price comparisons to make sure that it’s in the reasonable ballpark. I’m assuming we do, but let me confirm that.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Thank you. That’s a concern, right. I mean if someone’s coming in to get help and get assistance, and now they’re paying more than they could by going out on the fair market on their own, it’s kind of defeating the purpose of the program, so I just -- I would hope that there’s some sort of qualifier ongoing so the prices don’t increase just because someone happens to be an approved vendor for the state.
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Sure. And, I’m wondering if there’s an apples-to-apples comparison there or if it’s the exact same product that’s being quoted because in these programs we’re quoting high efficiency products.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): And, that was exactly it, and that is what got me. When she -- when she called me to say, hey, this is my problem. I don’t understand why this isn’t working properly, I said, you need to get me that information so I can pass it along to you as well because that’s very important for everyone to see. It should be completely transparent who those vendors are, what their pricing is, and what the motive is for -- we, of course, want everyone to be profitable and make money --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Right.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): But that is what this program is for, and it didn’t seem like that was following through, so I just want to make sure there’s some sort of vetting on the backend of that that maintains that standard.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Absolutely. And, I want to make sure that we can answer your question, so maybe offline we could exchange information about, you know, which program it was specifically that they were participating in and so forth so we can be sure to get to the root of that issue.


DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: That’s great.

REP. MESKERS (150TH): Thank you so much. Thank you, Madam Chair.
SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Nolan, followed by Representative Winkler.

REP. NOLAN (39TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning. I was wondering if you could send an email to -- through the Chair in regards to the bumps in the road you were talking about? I’m fairly new this year, and don’t have information on what you’ve done with the bumps in the road, how you’ve overcome them, or how you can be helped to overcome them. So, if you can send that through so everybody can get that in case there’s anybody else other than me? I’d appreciate that.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Yes. We can do that. Absolutely.

REP. NOLAN (39TH): Thank you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Winkler.

REP. WINKLER (56TH): Yes. Yes, Madam Chair. Which agency actually concludes the contracts with the Community Action Agencies to provide weatherization services?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: That would be us.

REP. WINKLER (56TH): And, when can the Community Action Agencies expect completed contracts for the 1920 energy year, we’ll say?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: I believe we’re in communications with them right now. I think -- yes.

REP. WINKLER (56TH): Yes.
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: We’re in the process of that as we speak.

REP. WINKLER (56TH): Do you have an estimate as to when the process will end?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: I think the estimate right now is sometime this fall. We’re hoping it will coincide with the beginning of the federal fiscal year for the LIHEAP dollar rollout, so --

REP. WINKLER (56TH): October 1?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: We’re hoping it will be right around or maybe just shortly after October 1.

REP. WINKLER (56TH): Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Thank you. Are there any more questions? I’m seeing none. Thank you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER HACKETT: Thank you.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Up next, back to -- now we’re onto the Community Services block grant allocation, and then we have Deputy Commissioner Kathleen Brennan coming up. And, it’s still morning. [Laughter].

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Okay. Once again, good morning, Senator Osten, Moore, Formica, Logan, and Representatives Walker, Abercrombie, Lavielle, Case, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Human Services Committee. I’m Kathy Brennan. I’m Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Social Services, and I’m here before you today to seek approval of the governor’s federal fiscal year 2020 allocation plan for the community services block grant, CSBG.
CSBG is administered by Health and Human Services, HHS, through the Administration for Children and Families, ACF, and the Office of Community Services. DSS is the designated -- is designated as the principle state agency for the allocation and administration of the block grant within the state of Connecticut, and we do so through our Office of Community Services, which is Carlene Taylor, who sat up here with me for the LIHEAP.

The purposes of CSBG are to provide assistance to states and local communities working through a network of Community Action Agencies for the reduction of poverty, the revitalization of low-income communities, and the empowerment of low-income families and individuals to become fully self-sufficient. Like LIHEAP, the CSBG federal funding level for fiscal year 2020 has not yet been released, and while the president’s budget proposes to eliminate CSBG, the plan for this year in order for us to do so in a timely manner, we have developed this allocation plan assuming that our funding for fiscal year ’20 will be level funded at the fiscal year ’19 program year, which was $8.6 million dollars. We are required by our federal partners to allocate 90 percent -- at least 90 percent of the CSBG funds that we receive to our Community Action Agencies, Community Action Programs, or Limited-Purpose Agencies.

In Connecticut, we have nine Community Action Agencies, and one Limited-Purpose Agency, and that is CAFCA, the Connecticut Association for Community Action, that qualify for the CSBG funding. Each of the CAA's have a specific catchment area, and accordingly, this plan proposes that $7.8 million
dollars or 90 percent of the $8.6 million-dollar total budget will be distributed by DSS through contracts with the CAAs and CAFCA. The proposed fiscal year 2020 allocations to the CAAs were calculated using the base amounts that entities should receive pursuant to the current agreements stipulated under 17b-888 of the Connecticut General Statutes, and they are set forth on table D on page 13 of the plan.

The department plans to retain the remaining 10 percent of the estimated block grant funding, a total of $861,000 dollars split evenly to support the cost of administration and for discretionary projects. The funds that we retain for administration are used by the department to support 2.75 DSS staff that are dedicated to the program and to provide the necessary programmatic and fiscal oversight, training, and monitoring requirements associated with the receipt of federal funds. The administrative cost for 2020 are equal to the ’19 estimated expenditures, and although both personal services and fringe benefit costs are expected to increase as a result of contractual agreements, the other expenses line item is expected to significantly decrease because there was a one-time cost in fiscal year ’19 associated with IT consulting services to support reporting compliance related to organizational standards in the triennial review activity.

The allocation to support the discretionary projects, which is about $430,000 dollars may be used by the department for training and technical assistance, compliance monitoring, and special initiatives that we use to strengthen the CA
network. In the event that our allocation plan -- I’m sorry. In the event that the actual allocation to Connecticut is greater or less than the estimate we’d use to develop the plan, we are required by HHS to proportionately adjust each of the recommended allocations, the grants to the CSBG eligible entities, and the allocations for discretionary programs and administration. If there are pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes 4-28b -- if there is a transfer to or from any specific allocation of over $50,000 dollars or 10 percent of a specific line item allocation, whichever is less, we would be required to resubmit to the joint committees of cognizance.

Table A on page 10 of the plan shows both the recommended allocations of the $8.6 million dollars from the CSBG block grant and a total source of funds available to support the program in fiscal year ’20. This includes an estimated $2.5 million dollars in carryforward bringing the total source of funds to $11.1 million dollars for the fiscal year ’20. We propose to expend the $8.6 million dollars, and to carry forward the $2.5 million dollars as contingency in case of a decrease in federal funding in future fiscal years or for one-time expenditures in future years to support identified needs of the CA network. CSBG funding is the core funding source for the state’s CA network, and such funds are required to be used to serve or improve the well-being of individuals with incomes at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level or $32,188 dollars for a family of four. The CAAAs help low-income people to become self-sufficient, improve living conditions, and have a stake in their community working in partnership with other service
providers, business, state-based organizations, and the advocacy community, CAAs strengthen families in their environment to help low-income people lead more secure lives. With CSBG as the base funding, additional contracts with other state agencies and municipalities and private donations, CAAs are able to operate a wide range of programs including energy assistance, housing and shelter programs, childcare and youth development services, holistic case management services, and nutrition services. As a recipient of the Community Services block grant, DSS is obligated to ensure that federal funds are utilized and expended in accordance with federal requirements. To do so and as stated in each contract, we conduct on-site and remote program and fiscal monitoring of each CAA to verify program accomplishments and to ensure adherence to applicable federal and state statutes, rules, regulations, the CSBG Community Action Plan, and the terms of our contract. We also perform the federally mandated CSBG triennial review, which requires us to conduct a full on-site review of each CAA at least once during each three-year period, as well as to assess compliance with the organizational standards that are put forth by HHS and CSBG information memorandum number 138.

The triennial monitoring report, which is prepared by the department and directed to the Executive Director of each CAA with a copy to their board chair, details compliance findings defined as an item or factor that’s not in compliance with federal, state, and/or contractual requirements, and risks defined as potential findings or a program or operational weakness that should be improved to avoid future noncompliance. The report includes the
department’s assessment of CAAs compliance with the organizational standards, identifying whether each standard has been met. Those standards that have not been met are considered to be a compliance finding. The CAA is then required to develop and submit to the department a technical action plan addressing and providing a corrective action plan for each identified risk and compliance finding. Throughout this process, we offer technical assistance and support to the CAA. At DSS, we continue to work closely with the CAAs to strengthen and improve the network. This unique partnership represents a commitment to improve and maximize efficiencies of Connecticut’s Human Service Delivery System to ensure that those in need can obtain the services, of course, they desire.

In closing, we join the governor and the Office of Policy and Management in recommending the approval of the CSBG allocation plan or federal fiscal year ’20. Thank you for your review and attention. My staff and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

SENATOR Osten (19TH): Representative Abercrombie. [Laughing].

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): [Laughing]. Thank you, Madam Chair. You can go first if you want. I know you just happened to look up and I was pointing. Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning, again. So, I’m gonna talk a little bit about the Community Services block grant form that you gave us.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.
REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): In the briefing that we had, and I’d like to talk about page 4, which talks about the agency status for the CAAs.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): Can you tell me what percentage of those agencies are at stable or above?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: We have nine Community Action Agencies. There are seven that are stable and above.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, for the other two that are below, in crisis, or vulnerable, what are you -- what steps have you taken to support them, to help them get up to the status of stable or better?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Certainly. The ABCD, the Community Action Agency in Bridgeport is in vulnerable status now. [Offline conversing]. I’m going to ask my colleague who joined to help me tell you the right answer.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): [Laughing]. If you could -- and if you could introduce yourself, please?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Sure. My name is Cassandra Norfleet-Johnson, and I’m a Program Manager with the Department of Social Services. So, to answer your question, two of the nine agencies are identified as in crisis, and you can be across that whole spectrum, if you will. ABCD is in crisis based upon the change in leadership. As Deputy Commissioner Brennan mentioned, there was a leadership change about maybe a year ago -- about eight months ago -- when the long-standing Executive Director, Charles B. Tisdale left the agency, and they had a little bit of leadership change. Based
upon that, the -- to answer your question, the department put controls in place --

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): I’m sorry. Because those mics are really difficult, you have to almost speak directly into them, and --

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Yeah.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): I just want to make sure everybody’s hearing what you say.

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: No problem at all. So, with the agency of ABCD, their agency in crisis was more around leadership and the governance aspect of it, and so the department provided ongoing training for the board, paid for consultants to come in and provide training and technical assistance to stabilize the agency, do training, look at leadership, and capacity building. That was one, and then the second one was the Community Action Agency of New Haven that was more of in crisis in a fiscal nature, so we provided training and technical assistance. They also hired consultants. We did board training to educate the board about their responsibility associated with that agency. The department also provides and manages and looks at monthly fiscal reports from the agency to see what’s going on with their finances and to continue to make sure that there’s forward movement.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): So, under the triennial monitoring visits, right, from the definition, it’s usually once a year, but it looks like if somebody falls in category below stable, you step up and -- and intervene at that point and try to help them get to that status on a more monthly basis or whatever the needs are at the time; is that correct?
CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Well, the triennial basis is once every three years tied to that piece of it, but we also do annual monitoring tied to client-file reviews. We do quarterly data reviews, so we’re always looking at that level of information. We’re also monitoring and reviewing the financial reports that come in, so there’s always a post on what’s going on at any given time, and anytime any agency needs technical assistance, they have a question, the 2.75 staff paid for with CSBG funding is there to assist in any manner. It’s not always -- it’s not always that we are identifying an issue. Sometimes the agency identifies an issue and asks for help, and we assist.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): And, because you don’t have the authority to remove any CAA from being a provider of the services, do you have a backup plan for if someone does fall below stable do you have a backup plan as to someone else that could step in if there became a situation where they would no longer be considered the provider for these services?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: So, that’s a great question, and yes. The short answer is yes that we continue to manage all of the catchment areas. The last thing we want is a catchment area to be without a viable Community Action Agency. In the unfortunate circumstance that we’ve experienced years ago in the Norwalk area where we lost a Community Action Agency, it was difficult because we went through a procurement that took a significant amount of time, and quite honestly, we -- there were difficulties with the selected vendor, and we ultimately ended up just reassigning parts of that
catchment area among two of the contiguous existing Community Action Agencies new opportunities as well as the Community Action Agency of Western -- I apologize -- ABCD -- not New Opportunities -- ABCD and Community Action Agency of Western Connecticut. Learning from that -- that matter, we are in much better shape now to identify -- well, number one, to do what we can to help support the current CAA, and too but if things happen we’re prepared to make sure that there are services in place.

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): So, I just want to take the opportunity to say thank you for putting some safeguards in place. I know that over -- I’m gonna say the last five years, we’ve had some hurdles with the CAAs and also with what on the DSS side, weatherization. There were a lot of missteps, so I’m thankful for the -- for DSS to kind of looking at this overall and putting some safeguards in place because the reality is this -- because this is a federal program, there are a lot of guidelines that we have to adhere to as a state. We get audited just like we audit our providers, so at the end of the day, it’s the people out there that we serve that we have to make sure that are getting the services that they need through this program, so thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Senator Formica.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you, Madam Chair. And, thank you to the good Representative. We seem to be thinking alike this morning, which could be frightening to both of us, but. [Laughter].

REP. ABERCROMBIE (83RD): [Laughing].
SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): [Offline conversing]. Anyways, thank you. As a followup to her questions, are there general controls that apply throughout the nine who have the financial controls, and etc.? Is there a standard program that each -- each one has top apply to because some of these things are even as far up as stable. It says weak controls, weak functioning, controls are inconsistent, no controls down at the bottom, and then other people at the top have adequate control, so I don’t know if they’re all the same and they’re not just being applied correctly or they’re each coming up with their own standards, and perhaps, one is not as good as the other?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: So, to answer your question, there are 58 organizational standards tied to that piece of it, and it looks at your agency based upon those fiscal controls, governance, board capacity, strategic planning, leadership types of things, and so when you look at those types of controls, when you’re looking at stable, those are like the base. There are some agencies that are thriving, and they’re doing best practice kinds of expert activities, so what we’re looking at is this is the minimum bar, and then anyone that’s doing wonderful work is thriving in all that. So, the department with the work with CAFCA and the Community Action Agencies, we meet with their planning staff -- planners -- every other month. We meet with the finance directors semiannual, and we’re working with HR directors semiannual to get exactly what you are talking about. Those that are doing a wonderful job we want to keep that activity going. Those that are kind of struggling we want to put community supports around them, as well as
provide technical assistance to get them to be even higher in all of that.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you very much. There’s no mentoring from the top to the bottom? Some of the number -- you know, the thriving folks are talking to the ones that are stable or below?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: They are always talking to each other, and we encourage that level of talking, which is why the department support CAFCA with discretionary dollars to make sure that community level work is going on. I think some of the items that you’re looking at really gets back to the board who actually hires the executive director.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Right.

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: The state Department of Social Services does not hire the executive director. We don’t have a role in monitoring or managing the executive director, which is why the department in our documentation on page 6 provided a fax sheet document for the role of the board to really help educate everyone here and in the community how important the board’s work is and really looking at the agency in a fiduciary role.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): I was gonna go there. The people that are managing these things are hired people, right? They come with resumes and job descriptions and -- and so if they’re not -- if they’re not pulling their weight -- you may have mentioned that may be why Bridgeport left. I’m not sure the background on that. You said there was a leadership change there, but as long as somebody’s looking, that’s the responsibility of the board for that? The individual board of the nine?
CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Yes.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Okay. And, then lastly if you could send to the committee where the other seven are in terms of the top three?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: We definitely will.

SENATOR FORMICA (20TH): Thank you very much. I greatly appreciate it. Thank you, Madam.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you very much. And, just so everyone knows, I believe the person in Bridgeport retired as senior age, so. Representative Pheanious Wilson, followed by Senator Moore.


DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Good morning.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Good morning, ladies, and thank you for your -- for your words and the contributions to the CSBG program.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Believe me, I understand just how important it is, and as a result, I’m worried about a couple of things. One in particular, was your mention of the potential elimination for CSBG from the president’s budget. I wonder if you can briefly describe what an impact that would have on our state should that occur?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Yeah. Catastrophic I think is the word. Quite honestly, I mean -- again, one of the reasons we carry the carryforward, right
-- which the funding is not nearly enough, but it -- but we would have something at least for a short period of time.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Are there any -- well, for lack of a better word -- contingency plans or any work being done on what if’s? ‘Cause that money -- because as I know you know, the CSBG money is what holds these Community Action Agencies together.

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: It is.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): It is all of their -- their, you know, programmatic and discretionary -- not even discretionary -- but the funding that is the glue between the multiple programs that they run.

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: That’s correct.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): And, should that money be lost, I’m wondering how those agencies are going to continue to function, and so therefore, I’m thinking do we have some -- are we talking some kind of a contingency within the agency and certainly, within the legislature for that?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: It’s a great question, and I think, unfortunately, the answer is no. I don’t know of any meaningful discussions yet that we’ve had, but it’s certainly something that we need to.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): When will that -- when will you know that that’s a final decision?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: [Offline conversing]. So, what’s being stated is that the House has voted
on a budget with funding for CSBG. However, the Senate has not voted yet on that budget.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Okay. Well, then I’m -- I remain very concerned about that. I think we all ought to be. We know what’s going on at the federal level. I don’t know what the Senate is going to do, but it would devastate Connecticut to lose those funds, and I think better be thinking about what if’s. That was one comment. The other -- I was looking at the -- at your, I believe, in the plan table B, which looks -- looks at the proposed allocations for the various agencies, and I was puzzled that there’s such a large gap between a couple of the agencies -- the Community Action Agency of New Haven and New Opportunities are both almost like at a 20 percent between ’19 and ’20, and all the others are like 5 to 8 percent reductions, and I’m -- I’m just puzzled as to why that is and how they’re gonna manage?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Sure. So, to that point, it’s really tied to the difference in the timing of payment, so if indeed, you look at ’18, you will see that those numbers are slightly different, so in those instances, those were costs that were incurred in ’18, but they weren’t actually paid until ’19, so that’s why it looks like there is such a large difference when it’s really not.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Okay. So, that’s the answer I’m trying to get to, so there really isn’t. But I am wondering about the underlying allocation formula that’s used for CSBG. Has that changed in recent years?
CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: No. That formula has not changed. [Laughter].

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Okay. Is there any thought to re -- you know, one of the things I’m concerned about is the differences in population size, poverty in the various regions, rural poverty versus city poverty, and I’m just wondering. It’s been many years since that allocation formula has been looked at -- since the ‘90s if I’m not mistaken [Laughing], and I’m wondering is there any thought to I guess we’d better find out if we’re gonna have any money, when we decide how to reallocate it, but is there any thought to making adjustments in that? has anybody talked about it? And, I know how difficult it is, but is that a matter of discussion even?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: So, to that point, as you know, or I’m not sure if everyone does know, that the formula is a negotiation in a discussion between the state DSS and the State Association and the CAA network, if you will. And, so to that point, there has not been any active conversation that I am aware of, but we will take that back, and check to see the will.

REP. WILSON PHEANIOUS (53RD): Well, I know that there have been attempts to -- and I know how difficult it is, but I just wondered if there’s any movement because some of the -- some of the more rural CAAs I know are experiencing with the transportation issues and poverty issues different levels of pain, if you will, than others, and I’m just hoping that one day we will take a look at that and get it straightened out. I think those area all the questions I have, but I just wanted to say how
important the work of CSBG, LIHEAP, DSS is in these areas for the poor people of this state, and I applaud you for the work that you’ve done and will have to continue to do on behalf of those populations, so thank you.

SENATOR OSTEM (19TH): Thank you. Senator Moore, followed by Representative Lavielle.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): Good morning, and thank you for your testimony. So, I have a question on the two agencies that were in crisis. Both in crisis for different reasons, right?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Correct.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): So, I -- I understand that Mr. Tisdale left more than a year ago, and there’s new leadership now at ABCD, and you’ve provided some services in helping them. What have you seen in the way of improvement or have you had an opportunity to see any changes in improvement for ABCD, and then secondly, what is the status of the New Haven Community Action Agency, and the debt that they had?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sure. As Cassie mentioned with ABCD, we continue to work with them. There’s a new Executive Director, Dr. Monette Ferguson, and we are actually planning on going into the agency in October to do another assessment, which if positive, we’ll take them out of that in crisis status, so I think we’ve seen some good work and some good movement, and we’re very hopeful for that October review. For CA New Haven, we -- they are continuing to operate under a corrective action plan, which Cassie mentioned is monitoring by DSS staff, you know, on a monthly basis with payment requests and the payments that they’re making. They
continue to struggle, quite honestly, and the department is doing what they can to support the Community Action Agency of New Haven. I think at this point the hardest part is that the majority of their funding is directly tied to the federal dollars through the CSBG and the LIHEAP program. They may have a small contract with the city of New Haven, but their discretionary funding seems to be limited at this point to fund raising, and as with all of our Community Action Agencies, they are grassroots organizations that are going to provide whatever services they can to help the people that they serve, and in some cases, they are providing services through programs that are not being fully funded, and those programs that are operating as a deficit, cause problems to the fiscal stability. So, it’s -- it’s a difficult situation for them to be in because they never want to stop providing the services to everyone that’s in that agency, but the federal dollars that we give are specific towards they got to be handled a certain way, and if they’re not, that’s when we start seeing issues with the financial stability of our Community Action Agencies. We continue to work with CA New Haven. The last thing we want to see is that Community Action Agency to fail.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): So, you know, New Haven is getting hit hard in a lot of places -- their nursing homes --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yeah.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): And, now this agency where there’s a lot of low-income people depending on this, so I would hope that we would -- if there’s a corrective action plan and we wouldn’t wait until
the last minute or until they’re in a hole and they can’t get out of it that we try to figure out how do we help them sustain themselves because as -- as the Representative said earlier, you know, if it’s federal dollars we don’t have control, but I believe we have a great deal -- we have a great delegation in Washington that will fight for our dollars, but equally so, we have to fight for these agencies here in Connecticut, and figure out how do we get them to where they need to be and sustain them. All right. So, thank you, and you know, I hope you’ll let us know long before something happens --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Absolutely.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): That it’s going to happen.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Yes.

SENATOR MOORE (22ND): All right. Thank you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Next up is Representative Lavielle.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Thank you. Yes. I’m still here.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: [Laughing].

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): My questions are somewhat -- my question is somewhat in the same vain on you spoke of my district a little while ago, which was the precursor to the Western Connecticut Agency, and that was -- you’ll remember that was quite a situation, and it was, you know, local. It had nothing to do with anything that happened at the state, but it was quite difficult for a long time, and you -- you all did a wonderful job resolving it
and finding a solution and everybody was very happy with that, and I think still is, but did that occasion any change in what you might term a triggering event? Were they -- were they -- I was never clear on how -- what the mechanism was by which the local people had to notify the state or where it was -- you -- you in looking at it, decided that the situation was grave enough to intervene, and were there any changes generally after that experience and how that’s managed?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, if -- if I understand your -- your question correctly, you’re kind of just like, you know, what happened there and are we, you know, what has changed since then with respect to how we can handle a similar situation if forbid it actually happen?

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Well, yeah, I hope there will never be a similar situation.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Right.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): But --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: So, with what our Community Action Agencies are federally mandated, the low anti-poverty agencies.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Right.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: If they are experiencing an issue, there is a very long process to de-designate an organization as it’s Community Action -- as a Community Action Agency. In the case that you’re talking about -- the former organization in that area actually walked away, so we didn’t have to go through the de-designation. They walked away. we had an intern step put in there as then we went
into a procurement. But what happens if you don’t have a CAA that’s designated, we lose that CSBG funding. Okay. We lose that money. We’re able to reach out to our sister Community Action Agencies to make sure that LIHEAP -- that some services can continue to be served -- provided -- but you lose that CSBG funding when that happens, and that’s what we don’t want to happen. There was a period of time for almost I think two years where we did not have that CSBG funding because there wasn’t a designated CAA. So, again, that’s why we continue to work to support the network to try to shore it up so that doesn’t happen again because if it did, we would have to go through a procurement. The federal government is clear. We can’t just simply award. We have to go through a procurement to select a new Community Action Agency, and it is a long and lengthy process, and at the end of the day, it’s the services then are limited in that catchment area because we don’t have access to those CSBG funds.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Well, are you able to begin intervening earlier at this stage than you were in that case?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: Sure. I mean you know we -- as Cassie had mentioned and I had mentioned earlier -- we look at agencies. We provide community -- I’m sorry -- corrective action plans. We provide technical assistance. We spend a lot of time in trying to do that. The Community Action Agencies take real hard looks at their structures to make sure that they are as efficient as possible, and yeah, so I do think we do what we need to do to put the building blocks in place and to try to protect the network, but at the end of the day, it
comes down to funding. At the end of the day, it comes down to funding, and in cases where you have a Community Action Agency who’s primary source of funding is federally based and not that discretionary income that could be used to help, you know, shore things up, that’s where the struggle begins, in my opinion.

REP. LAVIELLE (143RD): Thank you. I appreciate it. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you. Representative Mastro Francesco, and we are reaching the afternoon timeframe.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): [Laughing]. Thanks. And, is that a warning? [Laughter]. Thank you, Madam Chair.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): It’s an observation, and we still have one more person, so -- to talk to.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): I’ll be short. I promise.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Okay.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Thank you. Thank you again for being here. Just a couple of questions. On your testimony here, it says that the CAAs help the low-income people to become more self-sufficient and improve their living conditions. Can you give me an example of some of the programs out there that -- that address that issue and kind of exactly what they do, and have they been successful in the past?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Yes. So, to that point, what they do is that they identify barriers that a household might have or an individual
depending upon what’s going on. They do training, technical assistance, education. It could be employment. It could be case management. You might have one barrier here that’s tied to your housing, and if we address your housing, then you don’t need to worry about anything tied to your employment, daycare, or anything else, so it’s not -- they’re not just looking at one issue in a silo. When you come in, they assess you against 20 dimensions to see what’s going on, and then they have relationships with other community partners to be able to provide that support tied to that piece of it, so that’s what we mean when we say we’re looking at it with self-sufficiency. The other piece is that we assess people, and we look at and we report on domains tied to education, tied to employment, tied to income and assets, its housing, health, whatever might be going on they will work with that person to address that barrier.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENNAN: And, if I may in difference to Representative Wilson Pheanious and our former DSS Commissioner, Commissioner -- well Commissioner Wilson Kokra at the time was the force behind HSI, the Human Services Infrastructure Program, which is a wraparound that our Community Action Agency used, so it is safe funds that help support a holistic view, so what Cassie was telling you is someone walked in the door, they might think that this is the service I need, but by allowing us to do this through the HSI program, it’s a holistic view, so when you’re speaking -- when the CAAs are speaking to the people in front of them, they’re finding out, oh my gosh, it is not just education, it’s not just a house, it’s you know I need help for my elderly parent, I need daycare, so that is --
that’s one of the biggest benefits, if not one of the greatest benefits, of those CAAs. Plus, they are neighborhood known entities where folks feel comfortable walking in the door and sitting down and speaking with the person in front of them because they’ve been a part of the community for years, and that you -- you just can’t replicate that.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Thank you. Thank you for clarifying that, and just one more question. I’m reading through the allocation plan, and if you could just clarify something for me. There’s a section in here on page 2. It says the CSBG funds are required to be used to serve or improve the well-being of individuals with incomes at or below 125 percent of the poverty level and may be used to -- and not be used to support political activities or to pay for construction unless a specific waiver is obtained by the state from the federal government. So, has there been a waiver in the past where these funds were used for political activities and if not, why is that in here?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: I think they’re two different things. One is tied to the political activities you cannot give. The second part is tied to the waiver for construction, which we’ve never approved.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Okay. It’s confusing because it says political activities or to pay for construction. Either or that you would need federal approval, and I was just curious --

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: Sure.
REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): As to why that is in there. There has been no use for political activities with these funds.


REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Okay. [Offline conversing]. Literally just the language in the act. That’s what -- in the --

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): It’s in the federal documents.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): Yeah. The Economic Opportunity Act. That’s the language right from it, so that’s why it’s in the document.

REP. MASTROFRANCESCO (80TH): All right. Thank you very much for clarification.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Representative McCarty, I heard you have one quick question? [Laughter] [Laughing].

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Okay. I think I go very quickly, but thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. I just -- I wanted to align my comments with those of Representative Wilson Pheanious. I think it is important that we look at this contingency plan, and you will have a certain amount of dollars for the carry forward $2.5 million dollars something in that order. Do we have any idea if you look back in the past when we’ve had situations like this when could the -- when would that be solidified with the federal funding. How -- how many -- do you have any estimate and how far would those contingency funds carry us?

CASSANDRA NORFLEET-JOHNSON: So, last year, the actual plan was actually approved in November, but
in previous years, we’ve had continuing monthly resolutions, and that’s when this kind of carryforward is oh so important to help stabilize the network.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Okay. That’s what I thought. Thank you. And, if I may, just very quickly point out that I’m one of -- on the board of trustees of TVCCA, and I’m very proud of the work that TVCCA does and what they have done to pay all the vendors in a timely fashion, and also, I can tell you as a member of the board of trustees it’s very stringent what is required by the Board of Directors and all the compliance measures and requirements, and those -- most of the Community Action Agencies take the compliance requirements very seriously, and a good deal of time is spent to being 100 percent compliant, so I’d just like everyone to know that it’s taken very seriously by the Community Action Agencies, and they do such tremendous work in the communities in so many areas. I’d like the boards to know that they also depend quite a bit on volunteers --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: Yes.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): For services and hundreds of thousands of hours are given back to the state of Connecticut in the work that the volunteers do, so I can’t speak highly enough of what the Community Action Agencies do in our community. Thank you for that privilege.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRENnan: Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Thank you, Representative McCarty for your quick question.
REP. MCCARTY (38TH): [Laughing].

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): I’m seeing no other questions. [Laughing]. Thank you very much.

REP. MCCARTY (38TH): Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Up next is Deb Polun. Good afternoon. Please introduce yourself.

DEB POLUN: Yes. So, just a quick clarification. Should I be doing both pieces of testimony one right after the other three minutes a piece or am I mushed for three minutes [Laughing] of one at a time. All right. We’ll start with LIHEAP then. Good afternoon, distinguished chairpersons, ranking members, vice chairs, and all members of the Appropriations, Human Services, and Energy and Technology Communities. For the record, my name is Deb Polun, and I’m the new executive director of the Connecticut Association for Community Action or CAFCA, and I’m joined here at the table by Deb Monahan, CAFCA’s board chair and the executive director of TVCCA, the Community Action Agency serving Southeastern Connecticut. I’m honored to work with the state’s nine Community Action Agencies in their work to serve over 250,000 low-income people every year. I also sit on the Low-Income Advisory Board, and today, first, I’m here to support the allocation plan for the low-income home energy assistance program or LIHEAP. Many of you probably hear from your constituents on a regular basis about the cost of energy. Connecticut residents pay the highest energy rates in the entire country, and whether that’s for gas, electric, oil, that pain is being felt across the state -- Greenwich, Bridgeport, Putnam, Danbury, wherever you
live, you’re paying high energy costs. This pain is even more extreme for people with limited incomes. We know that people with incomes below 50 percent of federal poverty level are actually needing to spend about 38 percent of their household income just on energy. Think about that. Think about the crisis that that would put your family in to have to spend almost 40 percent of your income just on energy costs. It makes it virtually impossible to pay for all of the other needs that you have including housing, food, education, and healthcare, and energy and security in and of itself also impacts your health. As you can imagine, thinking about how cold our winters can be and how hot our summers can be as well.

So, I think you’ll agree that the importance of getting energy assistance to people across our state, but I also want to share with you the importance of using the Community Action Network for providing energy assistance through LIHEAP or CEAP. As was indicated by Deputy Commissioner Brennan, the Community Action Agencies serve people in a holistic integrated way, and so when somebody comes in for energy assistance, they’re actually being assessed for all of their other needs as well, and so that person might also end up receiving food assistance through SNAP or assistance with housing or a referral to get healthcare or even Head Start programming. This is a good way to help people get access not just to energy but to lots of other services that they need, so on behalf of the Community Action Network across the state, I do ask for your support of this plan, and I want to thank all of you for putting in this time today and always, and thank the Department of Social Services
and the -- and DEEP as well for their work on this program.

I also wanted to point out to you that at the end of our testimony we have included a list of phone numbers for your for your local Community Action Agency, so if you get phone calls from constituents, we do recommend that you have them call and see if they might be eligible for these programs. I’m happy to take your questions.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Why don’t you just go right on to the next one.

DEB POLUN: Perfect.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Get that one done too.

DEB POLUN: [Laughing]. Super. So, just again for the record, my name is Deb Polun, and I’m with the Connecticut Association for Community Action and joined by Deb Monahan from TVCCA in case anyone is just tuning in to the hearing now because they’re so interested in the Community Services block grant or CSBG. Again, I would ask for your support of the Community Services block grant. You have our written testimony, which also includes a lot of data about the work that the Community Action Agencies are doing and the number of people that are being served, but just in general, I want to tell you a little bit about what we love about CSBG, and what’s great about it is it allows flexibility for the Community Action Agencies to determine the needs of their communities, and think about how the needs might vary in a rural area versus an urban area or in -- in Southwestern Connecticut versus Northeastern Connecticut. Those needs might vary, and so with the CSBG funds, the Community Action
Agencies among other activities conduct a community needs assessment so that they can identify the specific needs of people who are living in their community with limited income and limited assets. Then, they take the findings from those needs assessments and implement plans to help address those needs. That’s really important, and it provides a level of service that we wouldn’t be able to provide if it was more dictated out exactly how each dollar was spent.

Again, because of the way the Community Action Agencies work, we’re serving families on a holistic integrated way, so that we can help address all of the needs that people come in with sometimes even before they’ve identified that that’s a need that they even have. I want to give you just one example of the work of CSBG and how it supports the work of the Community Action Agencies because truly CSBG funds are very rarely used for direct services. What they’re used for is the planning, the strategic planning for nation and so forth, so the program I want to talk to you about is VITA, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, and I hope most of you know a little bit about the great work of the VITA program, and this is a program where volunteers across the community come in, and they help lower income people file their income taxes, right. So, how does CSBG support -- support VITA? It helps to recruit volunteers for this program, train them, coordinate when and where the VITA services are going to be provided. It helps to provide outreach services so that people in the community know that VITA exists and that they can come in and have their taxes done. The computers and internet service, all of those sort of administrative things that you need to have
in order to -- to run a program like this, so CSBG doesn’t pay for the actual VITA program itself because these are volunteers who are providing the services, but what it does is it supports an infrastructure that allows for this program to run, and we know just how great the VITA program is and helping people get money returned back to them from the federal government and from the state of Connecticut as well. In fact, many people who were once clients of the VITA program end up becoming volunteers for the VITA program and for other programs at the Community Action Agency as well, and we see this with lots of programs across Community Action Agencies, but I wanted to be able to provide one example to bring it to light.

Each dollar in CSBG funds actually leverages $28.55 in federal, state, and local private resources. That’s how important CSBG is to our state and to our state’s residents, and so I ask for your support, and again, I’m here for any questions.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): Are there any questions? I’m seeing none. Thank you very much.

DEB POLUN: Thank you.

SENATOR OSTEN (19TH): So, the public hearing has now ended. We’re gonna take a two-minute break while we set up for the vote that will happen. So, if you could all just stay in your seats while we do that so we can take the vote.