



Testimony to the Connecticut General Assembly Housing Committee in **Support** of Proposed Bill 356: An Act Establishing an Energy Efficiency Retrofit Grant Program for Affordable Housing.

March 5, 2021

To the Honorable Chairs, Senator Lopes and Representative McGee, Co-Chairs, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members, and distinguished members of the Housing Committee:

I am Brenda Watson, Executive Director of Operation Fuel. Operation Fuel is a statewide organization that ensures equitable access to energy for all by providing year-round energy assistance, promoting energy independence, and advocating for affordable energy. Operation Fuel partners with local government and community-based organizations throughout Connecticut to ensure that families and individuals in need have access to year-round utility and water assistance.

[If any CT residents reading this right now need help paying your energy or water bills, please visit our website at www.operationfuel.org/gethelp and reach out to us.]

We write in strong support of SB 356: An Act Establishing an Energy Efficiency Retrofit Grant Program for Affordable Housing. This bill has many important benefits, including reducing energy consumption and costs, improving living conditions for residents, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and creating good, local jobs. Overall, we support the bill because it benefits CT's people, economy, and environment.

In 2019, Gov. Lamont invited Operation Fuel to the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3), where I co-chaired the Mitigation subcommittee on building energy. I also chair the Low Income Energy Advisory Board, which develops the state's plan to spend federal heating assistance (LIHEAP) in conjunction with the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Office of Policy & Management (OPM), and the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP). Operation Fuel is a member of the National Energy & Utility Assistance Coalition (NEUAC), which organizes and informs advocates nationwide on how to best leverage LIHEAP and other energy assistance in the states.

Decades into our work providing energy assistance to CT families in need, Operation Fuel has learned about and studied energy affordability in CT extensively. Our website details this work at <https://operationfuel.org/about/financialsreports/>. Our 2017 study from economist Roger Colton, and another that year from APPRISE, describe in detail the excessive energy burden faced by LMI households in our state. We followed up on this analysis in 2020 to examine how transportation burden adds to these costs, in collaboration with researchers at

VEIC and the CT Green Bank, where I am a director of the board. Bringing on a policy director in 2020, we are also engaged in several PURA dockets regarding clean energy and energy affordability.

Operation Fuel regularly interacts with our clients about their electric bills, describing various charges and sharing simple ways to lower costs. We also refer clients to Home Energy Solutions and HES-Income Eligible, which work with low- and moderate- income home owners to make their homes more efficient. These programs have made a big difference for many households in our state, and there is a lot more work to do.

Last year, I joined CT's Energy Efficiency Board (EEB), which manages the state's conservation and load management programs. In recent years the board has particularly focused on LMI consumers. We understand from contractors, DEEP, and the EDCs involved in these important programs that roughly 23-30% low income families cannot access the efficiency benefits that all ratepayers fund through our electric bills. Housing with lead, vermiculite, asbestos, knob-and-tube wiring, and other health hazards must have these issues addressed before the weatherization and efficiency upgrades can occur. Recently the EEB, with leadership from DEEP and the Acadia Center, has brought together a large workgroup of stakeholders to address barriers to weatherization and energy efficiency, particularly in low income housing. These have been very productive discussions and we are pleased to continue collaborating with those involved. We applaud the leadership for your work to advance SB 356, which is a continuation of these efforts.

CT law mandates the reduction greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030 and by 80% by 2050. To achieve these metrics, we must drastically reduce building carbon emissions and increase efficiency, particularly in older housing stock. This is an equity issue. While we at Operation Fuel understand that there will always be a need for emergency energy assistance, we must also plan proactively for the future – which means investing in the green economy workforce. The Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction reports that investments in the energy efficiency workforce generate the highest return on investment of any green job. Let's ensure the program prioritizes jobs with fair wages and labor protections for residents of Environmental Justice communities that have historically faced intentional disinvestment, and high levels of pollution. Spurring job growth in industries that make LMI housing safer and more comfortable helps our economy and our environment.

As you consider edits to SB 356, please ensure that the bill protects renters from immediate rent increases after the retrofits are implemented. We also recommend you consider a standard definition of "energy burden" – typically considered up to 6% of a person's income, but in the case of many LMI families in CT, as high as 20% [[VEIC Study on Transportation, Energy, and Housing Burden, 2020](#)]. As much as possible, the income eligibility for the program should align with the state's existing income guidelines.

Operation Fuel is a member of the CT Renews coalition, which is working across New England states to adopt green housing, jobs, public health, transportation, and environmental

justice legislation. SB 356 is an important piece of that work. We note that the Massachusetts legislature is considering a version of SB 356 that would retrofit 1 million homes across the state within 10 years. This will bring more investment, innovation, and jobs to solving our climate mitigation challenges. Just imagine the boost to the remediation, weatherization, and efficiency industries we could inspire by joining Massachusetts with that scale of commitment. We must accelerate our efforts to increase adoption of renewables, particularly in LMI communities. Vulnerable households and neighborhoods across our state can't do this alone - the state must lead. We applaud the leadership and this committee for doing just that. Please vote yes to pass SB 356, An Act Establishing an Energy Efficiency Retrofit Grant Program for Affordable Housing. Thank you.