

**Joint Informational Forum of the Appropriations,
Human Services and Energy&Technology Committees
(Regarding the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program
(LIHEAP) Block Grant)**

Testimony of Brenda Watson, Chair; Wendy W. Wanchak
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Recommended Action:

Support LIHEAP Plan With Recommendation

The Connecticut Low Income Energy Advisory Board (LIEAB), created by Conn. Gen. Stat. §16a-41b(b), is charged with the task of advising and assisting the Office of Policy Management (OPM) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) in the planning, development, implementation and coordination of energy assistance and energy efficiency program particularly for low-income households, and to make recommendations to the General Assembly regarding administration of the LIHEAP block grant.

Connecticut's LIHEAP Block Grant benefits are the primary source of energy affordability assistance in this State but still do not come close to making energy affordable for low-income residents.

With the 2021-2022 LIHEAP Block Grant Plan, the Department of Social Services has done the best job it can to bolster, administer and allocate the LIHEAP federal dollars it will receive and to maximize the amount of the assistance for low income households. The Department has also solicited and incorporated many of the recommendations from LIEAB and kept LIEAB well informed about utilization statistics and other program information. LIEAB applauds the efforts of DSS in this regard.

Despite the efforts of DSS to promote the energy assistance program, more can be done to facilitate access to this program and to the statutory winter shut-off protection for utility hardship customers, particularly during this pandemic.

LIEAB supports the 2021-2022 LIHEAP Plan with the following three recommendations:

1. **Complete the DSS On-Line Energy Assistance Application Form and**

It is imperative that low-income households be connected to as many resources as possible, including LIHEAP Block Grant benefits, available through the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program (CEAP). DSS recently began offering an on-line application form, but it does allow an applicant to actually complete the application process on-line. The process still requires that the application be printed, and that any accompanying documents be manually copied in preparation for an annual, in-person interview with a

community action agency, even where none of the prior year's eligibility information has changed. This often results in delays, confusion or hardship for applicants.

Having an available on-line application with the ability to upload necessary documentation can eliminate a considerable amount of the administrative man-hours involved in the application process, allow many applicants to complete applications more timely and at their convenience, thus encouraging greater participation.

2. **Incorporate the Energy Assistance Application into the General Application for DSS Benefit Programs.**

Having the application for energy assistance incorporated into the DSS general application form for other benefits could capture those DSS clients who otherwise do not know about the program, or who cannot navigate the in-person application process.

3. **Share Limited Customer Data with Utilities to Protect Hardship Customers**

For years, coordination between the DSS and utility companies to protect Connecticut's poorest and most vulnerable households has been encouraged, but not implemented. Specifically, we recommend that DSS be required to modify its applications for DSS benefit programs and benefits redetermination forms to include a section for applicants to authorize DSS to electronically transfer to the utilities information about households who automatically qualify for protection from dangerous winter utility shut-offs and who may be eligible for additional consumer protections and services.

This would enable access to protections for most vulnerable households, disproportionately disabled or suffering from competency or literacy issues or life stresses that make it difficult for them to access available protections on their own.

With information provided to the utilities by DSS the utilities could:

- Ensure that these households are automatically coded to prevent dangerous winter utility shut-offs;
- Provide automatic priority access to free energy conservation assistance under the programs in the Energy Efficiency Fund (CGS Sec. 26-245m);
- Be targeted for energy assistance reminders; and,
- Be provided information on special payment reminders including matching payment programs.

With DSS able to obtain authorization from vulnerable households on its own eligibility forms, any obstacle to instituting this sharing of information can be eliminated.

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