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Comments by Deb Polun, Executive Director
before the Connecticut General Assembly's
Appropriations, Human Services, and Energy & Technology Committees

Informational Forum on
the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
Block Grant Allocation Plan for FFY 2021

August 26, 2020

Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members, and
Members of the Appropriations, Human Services, and Energy & Technology
Committees:

Thank you for holding this informational forum on the proposed Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Block Grant Allocation Plan for FFY 2021. The Connecticut Association for Community Action (CAFCA) is the state association that works with Connecticut's Community Action Agencies (CAAs), the state and federal designated anti-poverty agencies serving over 250,000 low-income people in all 169 cities and towns across Connecticut.

The Community Action Agencies are proud partners with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and with other local agencies in the effort to raise awareness of and enroll people into the CT Energy Assistance Program (CEAP – CT's version of LIHEAP). In a typical year, CEAP helps over 81,000 families in the state who come to our doors looking for assistance with their heating bills to avoid unnecessary energy crises. This year, despite having to close our physical doors partway through the energy season, we were able to assist over 75,000 families in receiving energy assistance through CEAP.

Connecticut residents pay the highest energy costs in the nation,¹ and **Connecticut households with incomes below 50% of the Federal Poverty Level pay 49% of their annual income simply for their home energy bills.** Connecticut households with incomes from 50-100% of the Federal Poverty Level use more than 26% of their income for energy costs². Notably, these data

¹ McCann, Adam, "Most & Least Energy-Expensive States", *WalletHub*, July 14, 2020, <https://wallethub.com/edu/energy-costs-by-state/4833/>

² Colton, Fisher, Sheehan (2020). *Connecticut 2019 Home Energy Affordability Gap State Face Sheet*. (2019). Available from: http://www.homeenergyaffordabilitygap.com/03a_affordabilityData.html

are from 2019 – prior to the most recent rate increase Connecticut residents experienced last month. This is what our poorest families are up against during the cold winter months.

These high costs put families in crisis mode and threaten their ability to pay for other essential basic needs. This forces them to choose between heating their homes and other necessary costs like food, child care, health care, and housing.

Energy insecurity – when a household lacks consistent access to enough of the kinds of energy needed for health and safety – can lead to poor health outcomes for children³. Dr. Deborah Frank, M.D., distinguished professor and pediatrician with the Boston University School of Medicine and the Boston Medicine Center, testified before Congress⁴ that when certain household costs cannot be avoided and their heating bill is due, many poor families facing energy crises dip into the only flexible part of their budget to bridge the gap: their food budget. She notes that families and doctors know children will freeze to death before they starve to death, and that this tradeoff jeopardizes children’s current and future health and development by increasing a family’s food insecurity. This is known to doctors and researchers as the “heat or eat” dilemma⁵. She further stated:

“These untenable choices wreak havoc on all our citizens, but particularly on the health of our youngest and most vulnerable children. Babies and toddlers ages 0 to 3...are also among the most physiologically vulnerable to cold stress. We know...there is a partially effective medicine to protect children in this current epidemic of energy insecurity. That medicine is called LIHEAP. LIHEAP is a child survival program. LIHEAP is a child health program. LIHEAP is nutrition program, and LIHEAP is a child development program.”

While LIHEAP helps Connecticut’s most vulnerable and at-risk households, including those with children, older adults and persons with disabilities, afford high home energy costs, it does so much more. At its core, it is a health and safety program that positively impacts overall health and wellness. In our Community Action Agencies, LIHEAP also serves as a gateway to other programs and services families may not have known they were eligible for, such as housing assistance, child care, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. This effective, integrated service delivery approach provides families with the necessary short and long-term support they need to achieve and maintain economic stability.

As you well know, programs like LIHEAP are critical investments in our communities. In addition to helping families with energy costs, this program funnels federal funds right back into

³ Bailey, Kathryn, et al. (2011). LIHEAP Stabilizes Family Housing and Protects Children’s Health (Policy action brief). Available from: http://neada.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/childrens_healthenergy_brief_feb11.pdf

⁴ Climbing Cost of Heating Homes: Why LIHEAP is Essential: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Children and Families, Senate, 110th Cong. (2009) (testimony of Dr. Deborah A. Frank)

⁵ Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, John Cook, and Deborah A. Frank, *Fuel for our Future: Impacts of Energy Insecurity on Children’s Health, Nutrition, and Learning*, Children’s Sentential Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP), 2007, available at: http://www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/fuel_for_our_future_energy%20insecurity_Sept07.pdf

our communities, when it pays for delivery of oil, wood pellets and other fuels, helping to keep small businesses thriving.

Impact of COVID-19

This Spring, with COVID-19 taking hold, Community Action Agencies nimbly transitioned to providing services – including CEAP outreach and enrollment assistance – via telephone, mail, and drop-off⁶. This allowed CAAs to continue to assist individuals and families in meeting needs, while keeping staff and customers safe.

Although the needs of our communities increased, many people were not leaving their homes; many outreach sites, such as Town Halls, were closed. In the 2019/2020 program year, our network processed 89,771 CEAP applications and provided 75,260 eligible households with energy assistance, representing a slight decrease both in applications received and approved (4.6% and 7.6%, respectively). CAFCA, the CAA Network, and DSS have remained in constant communication during these times to ensure that CAAs had the resources and information they needed to reach and serve customers during that time.

Given the economic downturn, and the attention to rising energy costs, it is expected that more Connecticut families will need assistance with energy costs this year. CAAs stand ready to assist with remote application assistance this program year. Additionally, most CAAs have started making appointments for safe, in-person application assistance. Early intake for this program year began on August 3rd.

On behalf of Connecticut's Community Action Network, I would like to thank all of you, as well as Commissioner Gifford and her staff at the Department of Social Services, for your support of and advocacy for this critical program. For your information, I included a list of Community Action Agencies and their phone numbers so you can help your constituents access this program (see Table 1 on next page).

⁶ There was one exception: TEAM, Inc has remained open to in-person customers.

Table 1: Community Action Agencies & Phone Numbers for Energy Assistance

Agency	Area Covered	Energy Assistance #
<i>Access</i>	Willimantic	(860) 450-7423
	Danielson	(860) 412-1568
Alliance for Community Empowerment (formerly ABCD)	Greater Bridgeport & Norwalk	(203) 384-6904
CAANH	Greater New Haven	(203) 285-8018
CAAWC	Greater Danbury	(203) 748-5422
	Greater Stamford	(203) 357-0720
CRT	Greater Hartford & Middlesex Counties	(860) 560-5800
HRA	Greater New Britain/Bristol	(860) 356-2000
NOI	Greater Waterbury	(203) 756-8151
	Greater Meriden	(203) 235-0278
TEAM	Lower Naugatuck Valley	(203) 736-5420
TVCCA	Southeastern CT	(860) 425-6681