



## Heating Oil Aid Called Vital For Many In The Northeast

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**Washington** — When Hartford resident Robin Hussain left her job to care for her grandchildren full-time, she quickly learned that federal energy assistance, not savvy shopping, would help her make ends meet.

“Your heating cost is the toughest thing to manage in your entire household budget,” she said. “There are many expenses that you can bring down. You can shop more carefully for groceries and you can clip coupons or switch to another market. You can get used clothes. You can find a more affordable apartment. But you don’t have a choice when it comes to heating that apartment.”

This year, Hussain is receiving \$675 toward paying her heating and hot water bill, from the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

She made the comments Wednesday at a hearing held by the Children and Families Subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which is chaired by Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn). Hussain is also on a plan in which the gas company fully matches her \$80 monthly payments, she said.

Dodd is one of many legislators advocating that the fiscal 2009 budget contain the \$5.1 billion required to fully fund the federal heating assistance program and help more households like Hussain’s. President Bush’s budget requested only \$2 billion for the program, down from \$2.57 billion for this year. Fully funding the energy assistance program would cost roughly half as much as a month in the Iraq War, Dodd said.

Dodd said almost twice as many Connecticut households ran out of their basic heating assistance money by mid January compared to last year. According to the state Department of Social Services almost 19,000 people have exhausted their assistance.

Last year, 211 families ran out of the extra, emergency assistance they are forced to rely on when the basic funding runs out. This year, more than ten times as many — 2,981 — have exhausted that emergency heating assistance.

Rising fuel prices, growing unemployment and the sub-prime loan crisis make expanding the heating assistance program, also known as LIHEAP, even more pressing, said. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.).

“It seems to me that LIHEAP recipients are in the middle of a perfect storm,” he said. “The explosion in costs for oil has just been something just so dramatic and so out of step with people on fixed incomes.”

When some legislators pushed for heating assistance in the economic stimulus plan Congress approved last month, they were assailed by some as trying to score political points. Dodd said heating assistance “is not just a heating and cooling program—it is a homeownership program, a nutrition program and certainly a health program.”

Dr. Deborah Frank, a pediatrics professor at the Boston University School of Medicine, urged the senators to expand heating assistance from a child health and developmental standpoint, noting that babies will freeze

to death before they will starve to death.

Children in families who spend grocery money on heating bills suffer from malnutrition, she added. She also pointed to two siblings in Boston who died in a fire started by their family's space heater, which many struggling households use to lower oil expenses.

Frank also said that children whose families are eligible for heating assistance but do not receive it are 23 percent more likely to have poor physical growth and 32 percent more likely to be admitted to the hospital than their peers in families receiving heating assistance.

She looked to the subcommittee to help alleviate these ills.

"There is a medicine that is partially effective in protecting children from the current epidemic of energy insecurity and its costly consequences, not just in human suffering, but in medical and educational costs now and in the future," Frank said. "That medicine is public energy assistance."