

Testimony of Ms. Robin Hussain

**Subcommittee on Children and Families, Senate Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions Committee**

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Good morning, my name is Robin Hussain, a single grandmother raising three grandchildren in Hartford, CT. I particularly want to thank Senator Dodd, our Senator, who never forgets how ordinary people in Connecticut are struggling and need his help. I am very grateful to Senator Alexander, Senator Kennedy, and the Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to speak to you on behalf of LIHEAP, and how much it helps to stabilize low income households like mine and my neighbors.

As I see it, your heating cost is the toughest thing to manage in your entire household budget. I'm a really good manager, and I find there are many other expenses that you *can* bring down. You can shop carefully for groceries and 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. You can't choose a different natural gas vendor. There are no coupons to clip. If you rent, you have no control over the efficiency of the furnace. But heat is not optional; it's not a luxury. You might turn down the thermostat, but you're still going to need to heat your apartment.

And what do you do if you're looking at a gas bill of more than \$300 per month for heat, hot water and cooking? That's what my bill would have been over the last three winters,

if I had not been receiving LIHEAP and participating in the matching-payment program with our utility. At times, our rent took more than two-thirds of our family income. How would I have kept the heat on in the apartment?

Believe me, I never thought that I'd be asking anyone for help. I got my working papers when I was just 12, so I could join a city group that raked leaves and picked up trash. During high school, I had two jobs. I had a lot of energy and a lot of ambition.

As an adult, I've been in retail, catering, car rentals. I'm a good organizer, so I was always promoted to the manager level. I raised three children, and we were what you would call 'comfortable.' Not really well off, but definitely getting along. My favorite job was managing a Thrifty Car Rental headquarters. I brought home \$575 a week after taxes and had a company car. From where I sit today, that looks like easy street.

Things really started to change in 2001. To put it bluntly, I lost my fight to keep my daughters away from the world of violence and drugs. In spite of everything our family tried to do, it became clear that I'd have to step in and care for my grandchildren to give them the kind of life my daughters were unable to pull together.

So the "empty nest" years of career growth and prosperity turned into a struggle to parent two children under the age of three, trying to keep a job and pay the babysitters. Then I really hit the wall: taking care of the children when they were sick made me miss work too often to hang onto my job as a manager at a BJ's Wholesale Club.

At this point I was looking at a grandparent stipend of \$666 per month and no other income. My rent was really low – just \$450 for a three bedroom apartment. But food, phone, heat, electricity, gasoline, and car insurance ... you can't squeeze all of that out of the other \$216 per month. I wondered if I would have to give up our apartment and move in with family or friends. But a grandmother with two preschool children? How long could we stay on someone's couch?

You've heard the expression, "When one door closes, another opens." My brother told me about the Community Renewal Team, where I could get the kids into Head Start and find some help managing my bills. I worked with a case manager, and we started on a budget plan right away. The most important thing was the energy assistance program. It helped me pay the heat bills in that drafty old apartment. This year, LIHEAP is paying **\$675** toward my heat and hot water bill. To cover the rest, I'm on a payment plan, and I bring \$80 per month to the gas company. If I get the payment in on time, the gas company matches it, dollar for dollar. In other words, they forgive \$80 for each \$80 that I pay.

Maybe that doesn't sound like much to some people. But it's hard to find that \$80 some months. My other bills, I kind of alternate. Some months I pay the electricity, but not the phone bill. Other times it's the other way around. But I try to stick to paying that gas bill on time, because if you're late, you lose the match for the rest of the winter. It's still hard, but LIHEAP has helped me take better care of my family.

With the children enrolled in Head Start, I went back to work. First I substituted in Head Start classrooms, so my hours would match the kids'. But the money was just enough to push me over the income limit for my medical insurance. So I found an early shift job at a hotel where I got full medical insurance. Neither of those jobs paid great wages, so I still relied on the Energy Assistance Program. It's help that I can count on for one of the most basic needs—keeping my family warm.

The most recent chapter in my story is sitting behind me today in the hearing room. This past year I was asked to take in one more granddaughter, who has been through some really traumatic experiences. Right now, DCF is not allowing her to be left with a sitter – not even one of our relatives – which is why she came to Washington with me. Her medical appointments, psychiatrist appointments, court dates, and all have kept me from working this year. So LIHEAP has been a lifesaver again.

In closing, I hope that I have been able to convey how important LIHEAP is to low income people. There are a lot of what working class people, people like me who are trying to work, to raise families, to make ends meet. The LIHEAP program treats people with dignity. It helps ease the burden of staying warm in the winter, whether you're in an apartment heated with gas or a home heated with oil. We can all see that fuel and heat have gone sky high in the last couple of years. Programs like this help prevent people from freezing, or losing their apartment altogether. Thank you.