

**Testimony of Linda Barlow
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**House of Representatives Committee on Education & Labor
Sub-Committee: Healthy Families**

**“LI HEAP: Overview and Current Issues”
November 13, 2007**

Overview

Established in 1969, EAC administers over 70 programs across Long Island and the 5 boroughs of New York City, assisting more than 45,000 people annually. Our unique programs provide services for people with substance abuse addictions, students experiencing learning difficulties, child victims of physical or sexual abuse or caught in the foster care system, frail elderly individuals needing support and guidance, and welfare recipients seeking work.

EAC assists people with basic living support, such as those who need help with utility payments. Due to the rising costs of energy, growing population of the elderly on fixed incomes, and the cold winters, these numbers are increasing daily. Our home energy programs assist these low income families in meeting the cost of energy and utility expenses, safety needs and also identify energy-related structural problems in homes, making arrangements for correction of these problems.

The Education and Assistance Corporation (EAC) has been administering the HEAP program since 1991. In the 2006/2007 heating season, we served 5,051 applicants. The program provides eligible households with benefits to assist with their heating and utility costs. EAC is under contract with the Nassau County Department of Social Services to process HEAP applications. Gross income includes but is not limited to salary, pension/retirement benefits, social security, unemployment benefits and worker’s compensation. All applicants are interviewed by a worker to evaluate their application and determine eligibility.

Eligible HEAP applicants may also apply for additional programs in our office. HEAP staff process applications for Verizon’s LIFELINE Program, which offers discounted phone service for eligible clients. Clients who have exhausted their HEAP benefits may apply for PROJECT WARMTH benefits, which helps clients who are in immediate need of oil or who have scheduled termination notice for LIPA. Project Warmth benefits are provided through United Way and LIPA. Voter registration applications are also available for clients. Additional referrals are given for Food Stamps, Public Assistance and Emergency Assistance.

Funding: Funding for EAC’s HEAP program is provided by Nassau County Department of Social Services.

In addition to HEAP, EAC also implements the Weatherization Referral and Packaging Program to assist low income families in meeting home energy and safety needs. Working in combination with the Home Energy Assistance Program, WRAP helps to identify energy-related structural problems in homes and makes arrangements for correction of identified problems.

Weatherization is an essential part of assisting families in need of home energy assistance. In order to ascertain a household's needs, WRAP staff may conduct a home assessment to identify any apparent energy-related structural deficiencies. The WRAP Coordinator identifies any immediate needs necessary and assesses any other issues related to social, health or safety problems. If repairs are needed, WRAP staff serve as a liaison with the Weatherization Assistance Provider, helping to guide clients through the service process and working with the Weatherization Provider to ensure delivery of services. Recommendations may include insulation and caulking of windows and doors, repair of broken windows, replacement of doors, repairs on the heating system or wrapping of pipes and water heaters.

Clients receive a directory outlining other agencies offering assistance with housing, home repairs, financial information, emergencies, weatherization, food pantries and crisis intervention.

Funding: Funding for HEAP is provided by Nassau County Department of Social Services.

SUCSESSES:

Almost two decades of administering HEAP gives our agency a breadth and depth of experience with the program. It is our contention that with rising heating costs coupled with the high cost of living on Long Island, many Long Islanders would be cold, hungry and possibly homeless without the HEAP program. County residents line up at our door starting at 7:00 a.m. when the HEAP season starts. They are anxious and afraid of what the winter will bring. Many are vulnerable senior citizens and their issues are complex. They depend on HEAP to get them through the long winter months.

I just wanted to share with you a brief vignette to show you how essential HEAP is. Mr Jones applied for HEAP assistance on a cold February morning. He was interviewed by a worker and submitted all of the required documents to process his application. The application was approved for a Regular Oil benefit for \$400.00. He thanked the worker and left the office. About an hour later we noticed Mr. Jones sitting in the reception area and called him into the office. Once again we informed him that his application was approved and he would receive the oil within 72 hours. This very tall frail eighty year old man looked the worker in the eyes and said, "yes Ma'am thank you, I was just sitting here for a while to warm up before I start walking back home." Home was 8 miles away, on this very cold and snowy day.

It turns out he ran out of oil during the night and had no money for oil and did not have an oil contract with a company. He never mentioned this or the fact that his oil burner was completely off and needed a prime to start up again. He said that if he informed us that he needed a prime he would receive less oil and preferred to prime the burner himself. EAC staff immediately went into turbo mode, while he waited, we were able to get him a new winter coat, blankets and called and paid for a cab to take him home.

CHALLENGES:

Despite an increasing number of applicants over the years, our agency's funding has remained stagnant for the last thirteen years. We currently receive \$190,900 to operate HEAP and \$30,916 to operate WRAP. With inflation and all other costs related to the program escalating, this has made it almost impossible to operate the program. Staff are severely under compensated and each year we have to lay them off earlier in the season. As efficient as we are, waiting time for new application's is longer (now averaging 2.5 hours) as we do not have the staff for adequate assistance. Despite our best efforts, we continue to feel like we are losing ground.

CONCLUSION:

Heating costs for an average family using heating oil are projected to soar this winter. Lower income Americans can least afford price increases. In 2007, the average American household will spend nearly \$5,000 for residential energy services and gasoline - The 61 million households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or less-the majority of American households - will spend 18% of their after-tax income on energy. In 1997, energy consumed just 10% of the after-tax income of these working families. HEAP and WRAP have been a God send to the vulnerable population in Nassau County. The program needs to be reauthorized . However, reauthorization without additional financial support will not solve the problem. Agencies and programs that implement HEAP need to receive enough money to properly serve their constituents in their time of need.