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Testimony presented to a Public Hearing on LD-3 An Act to Establish the Winter Energy Relief Payment Program to Aid Residents with High Heating Costs and to Finalize the COVID Pandemic Relief Payment Program, before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs of the Maine State Legislature, December 21, 2022, at 1 p.m.

Honorable Members of the Committee:

I am speaking in qualified support of the proposed legislation in LD-3, An Act to Establish Winter Energy Relief, cited above.

In support, because of the unprecedented level of need for home heating assistance among the low-income households most affected by the skyrocketing fuel costs this winter.

My support is qualified in that the need is being experienced disproportionately by those who must apply for the Federal Fuel assistance program known as LiHEAP but are unable to receive it in a timely manner because of a complete misunderstanding of those agencies processing their applications.

Creating a winter fuel relief payment program without addressing how to distribute these funds effectively and efficiently is a recipe for disaster that no-one wants to see.

Here in Washington County, our County Action Agency, Downeast Community Partners, which only began processing applications after Labor Day, is currently scheduling appointments for heating assistance in late March and April which ensures that federally provided fuel assistance will not reach qualified recipients for four to five months, when it will be too late. The desperate need is **NOW**, as winter seals its icy grip on those who are being forced to make drastic choices to avoid freezing in the coldest months that lie ahead.

The recent move to make online applications available through mainehousing.org is open **only** to those who have **not** already made an appointment by phone to submit their paperwork. Those who applied earlier must wait.

An across-the-board payment of \$450 to a majority of qualified householders in the State earning less than \$200,000/150,000 a year is of no use in keeping low-income families from freezing this winter!

A wiser, and far more compassionate response is to open the online application process to all who are in immediate need, create a review process that can recognize the most pressing circumstances, and ***speedily*** act on them.

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Our small community charity operates a community emergency fuel fund to do just that for the greater Eastport area. We are usually able to provide relief within hours for those in emergency situations.

On November 17, we wrote a letter to the Governor asking for her help in meeting the need of the most vulnerable of our citizens, which I have attached for your information. A wise, disciplined, and immediate response to bring relief to those who need it most will save lives, preserve families, and rescue those whose health and welfare is most at risk.

Please do all that you can to get help to those who need it most and soonest.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you.

Colin Windhorst, Board Member,
Greater Eastport Ecumenical Churches Association, GEECA Inc.