

## Testimony in Support of

### 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"

Good Afternoon President Jackson, Speaker Talbot Ross and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Betsy Sawyer-Manter and I am the CEO at SeniorsPlus, the Area Agency on Aging for Western Maine and the largest statewide Care Coordination Agency in the state.

Today I am here representing both the Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging and the Maine Council on Aging. The five agencies that make up the Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging assist many thousands of people across the state in accessing Meals on Wheels, Caregiver Services, Medicare Counseling, Money Minders, short term case management as well as triaging all types of Information and Assistance.

We support passage of LD 3. Heating their homes and affording the high energy costs of housing and energy is top of mind for many of the older adults and people with disabilities that we encounter in our work.

For some it will be choice of staying warm, or buying food or medicines. These are not choices anyone should be forced to make. I fear that people will use dangerous methods to stay warm such as unsafe space heaters or ovens.

LD 3 will provide relief and sense of security to the many Mainers who will need this support to cope with the cold that we know will inevitably come. Today, at 4:46 PM, winter in Maine officially begins and we know that it is just the beginning of months of cold and snow. The people of Maine are resilient but those on fixed incomes can only make a dollar stretch so far. While our Yankee ingenuity and spirit is a source of pride, it can also lead to unsafe practices that put lives at risk. LD 3 helps to mitigate that risk.

This morning, I reached out to my team across the state to see what they are hearing from the clients that they are working with. I have never experienced the volume of responses that I have received. From across the state and the agency, I

have received heartbreaking real life accounts of the fear and hopelessness people are feeling.

I will share one such story and have attached to my testimony many more accounts of real Mainers struggles.

- A 61 year old woman in Canton was awarded just under \$300.00 for her fuel assistance, lives in a mobile home and only receives \$800.00 a month on Social Security. She is worried what she will do once that oil runs out.

The stories I share could be told by many of us on the front line working with everyday Maine people. I also know that many of you have heard the same types of stories as you have travelled around the state. LD 3 is necessary now and needs the support of the legislature.

I am available if you have any questions.

Thank you.

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Stories from Older Adults and People with Disabilities From Across the State –  
related by SeniorsPlus staff

- An 89 year old woman who bought her family home (big old farm house) 50 years ago. In October she spent \$700 on heating oil and last month she told me she spent over \$1000 for oil and she said that is more than her income.
- Many of these folks live in trailers---the oil tanks are outside which means they need the K-1 so it will not gel.
- Another client told me that she got her letter back regarding how much money for oil from LHEAP she would get to find she was getting \$16.
- My clients are worried about oil and electric heating costs, with some clients moving in with other family for the winter. APS and Maximus have talked with me about seeing people without heat because they can't afford it.
- A 68, single woman on disability who is very worried about heating cost. So much so, that she asked if she could live with a friend this winter. Unfortunately they do not have the room, especially now since they are working from home. This topic comes up every time we talk. I do worry about her having Congestive Heart Failure and worrying so much about how she will stay warm this winter.
- This is an ongoing theme with many of my daily check in calls especially in Aroostook County, as the cold temps/winter seems to linger here much longer than for other pockets of the state. People have been asking me if I think there will be additional funding for HEAP as they are not sure what they will do come March when it is still cold/snowy and the fuel cost are probably still going to be the same as they are now.
- Due to the overall increase in food, supplies (toilet paper/soap), electricity, gas, home heating sources it is taking a toll and is an added stressor for many people who were already on a very fixed budget.
- I have a client in the Rumford area who is 75 years old. She had a friend hang blankets all over her walls in her house to help save on the heat and has the thermostat set as low as she can stand it and is wearing layers to keep warm. She was awarded one tank of fuel for the heating season and she is very worried that there won't be any funds available for the rest of the season and the best I can do is refer her back to the CAP Agency in hopes that they have more funds later in the season or to the town office for emergency funds and those are very limited.
- A 66-year-old man in Peru who has shut off all of his house and closed off the upstairs in hopes to make his heat last as long as possible.

- I have a client in Rumford that is being priced out of her rental and she is on wait lists for subsidized housing, but it can take some time to move up on those wait lists and her rent goes up in January. She is worried she will be homeless at 75 years old and on a fixed income from SS.
- I have a 79 year old male client in Mexico age that had heard his rent went up for the second time and he was going to have to move in to an apartment with his daughter and grandkids and live in the living room. He gave his notice to his landlord and then his landlord said that he didn't want to lose a good tenant and offered to not raise it again, and because the client is getting ready to do home dialysis he decided to stay and cut some other things out of his budget.
- I estimate that I discuss how to afford heating during about 20% of the calls I take. I recently spoke with a couple who applied for heat assistance in the past and were \$4 over income but cannot make it without some help.
- I have heard from several clients who are working with LIHEAP for the first time, as well as educating them on reaching out to their local general assistance offices for heat assistance. I have heard twice, "it cost me \$1000 to fill up my tank" and they are very stressed about how they will pay this.
- What I am hearing is the need for rental assistance. Many rents have increased. While gas may be going down, the cost of household items and other items that cannot be purchased with food stamps, has increased. This included cleaning supplies, pet food/supplies, and OTC medications not covered by their insurance. Most of my client who own their home have applied for LIHEAP and use this resource to help heat their home. When additional funds are allotted for LIHEAP, this also helps as the funding is sent directly to the fuel supplier and used for their intended purpose. We have many clients who own their home have had to let their homeowner's insurance lapse and struggle with making their property tax payments partly due to the cost of living increase not keeping up with the actual cost of living.
- A 67 year old woman from Auburn, is frail, has chronic back pain and came in for Medicare counseling during Open Enrollment. I have been assisting her with the application however during the process I always screen for other benefits and suggested she contact the CAP Agency for LIHEAP. The client was unaware that she and her husband could qualify plus she had no idea that might also qualify to be weatherized. As this client has minimal SS income and her husband works as a lower paying job, they have been struggling financially. Yesterday she told me that their house is 800 sq. feet and they struggle to heat it. At night they turn the heat down to 60 degrees and during the day they turn the heat up to 68. She said they put plastic over their windows to help cut the drafts but, their house is still chilly. This couple also struggles with CMP bills so I

explained that if they qualify for LIHEAP they will also get a lower rate on their electric bill.

- It is a recurrent theme in my contact calls. Clients are very concerned about affording to heat their homes and purchase food and other necessities.
- I do hear my clients express their concerns about the cost of heating fuel quite a bit. They will say things such as: I don't know how I am going to heat my home, I can't afford it. I also hear clients say they are using space heaters to compensate and that is going to increase their light bill. I have to decide whether I heat my home or eat. I ask my clients if they applied for fuel assistance and some have been told they make too much and I also hear I am still waiting to hear if I have been approved or not. These conversations with them are heart breaking and sad.

