

Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee
Public Hearing
Senate Bill 1124 and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program
(LIHEAP)
February 3, 2010

Testimony of Community Legal Services, Inc.

Good Morning Madam Chairperson and Committee members. My name is Maripat Pileggi and I am a staff attorney with Community Legal Services in Philadelphia. CLS provides free legal services to the low-income community of Philadelphia. I work with and represent applicants for and recipients of many types of public benefits administered by the Department of Public Welfare, including LIHEAP benefits. I am here to speak on behalf of my clients, to express deep concerns about proposed Senate Bill 1124, and to offer recommendations regarding the LIHEAP program. Thank you for inviting CLS to present testimony today.

In the interest of time and in an attempt to avoid repetition, my testimony has been prepared in coordination with that of the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project. I support and endorse their testimony and agree that S.B. 1124 will negatively affect the Department's ability to assist low income consumers and only benefit special interest groups for all of the reasons Mr. Geller gave in his testimony. S.B. 1124 will do nothing to improve the LIHEAP program. My testimony will focus on what can be done to bring needed improvements.

The purpose of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, is to help low-income consumers afford heat so that they can stay warm and alive throughout the winter. This is a particularly challenging goal to meet in Pennsylvania, where energy costs are climbing, utility termination rates are rising, and, unlike every other state in northeastern United States, there are no state funds to supplement federal LIHEAP funds. The Department of Public Welfare relies solely on the federal LIHEAP grant, the amount of which can change drastically from year to year. Each year, DPW makes tough choices to get limited funding to those in the most need and should be commended for these efforts. DPW has faced many challenges this LIHEAP season and today responded to growing concerns by announcing they are considering and working to be able to make two very important changes: first, consumers who receive a utility termination notice with a scheduled termination date after April 1 may be able to receive a Crisis grant to prevent termination and, second, consumers will be able to receive more than one Crisis grant this LIHEAP season.

DPW's response to public concern is positive and we are hopeful that the problems that remain within the LIHEAP program can also be resolved administratively. While passing S.B. 1124 would do nothing to fix the problems that still exist in the LIHEAP program, this Committee can and should charge DPW with taking the following steps:

- **Increase the Crisis grant amount.** Pennsylvania just received \$26 million to add to the \$142 million received at the opening of the LIHEAP season. Yet, this year's LIHEAP Crisis grant remains at just \$400. This is half of what the Crisis grant was last year.