



Operation Fuel testimony on [Raised Bill 6653, An Act Concerning Healthy Homes.](#)
Submitted by Brenda Watson, MA, Executive Director, Operation Fuel. March 23, 2021.
To the Public Health Committee, public hearing March 24, 2021.

Co-chairs Sen. Abrams and Rep. Steinberg; Ranking Members Sen. Hwang, Sen. Somers, and Rep. Petit, and Vice-Chairs Sen. Anwar, Sen. Kushner, and Rep. Gilchrest,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Raised Bill 6653, An Act Concerning Healthy Homes. Operation Fuel appreciates the work of this committee and leaders across our state who are prioritizing health and safety conditions for homes across our state.

Operation Fuel ensures equitable access to energy for all by providing year-round energy and utility assistance, promoting energy independence, and advocating for affordable energy. We partner with local government and community-based organizations throughout Connecticut to ensure that families and individuals in need have access to year-round utility and water assistance. We were founded in the late 1970s as the nation's first fuel bank, helping struggling families pay their heat and light bills. Today our programs have grown to include home systems repair and replacement, water bill assistance, and homelessness intervention – as energy insecurity is one of the leading causes of homelessness.

Since 2015, our emergency assistance funds have received about \$2.1M annually from the ratepayer funded Systems Benefit Charge. We serve diverse Low- and Moderate-Income (LMI) households from every municipality in Connecticut. As Co-Chair of the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board, a board member of the Green Bank, and member of the Energy Efficiency Board that manages our state's Conservation & Load Management plan, I believe this effort is crucial for our public health, economic development, and environmental goals as a state.

Operation Fuel's core mission is to address our clients' urgent needs for access to heat, light, and water. Additionally, we advocate for our clients in administrative, regulatory, and legislative arenas, sharing their lived experiences with policymakers who would not otherwise hear these stories. In 2017, Operation Fuel commissioned a study from economist Roger Colton; and another from APPRISE; each describes excessive energy burden faced by LMI communities. In 2020 we collaborated with researchers at VEIC and the CT Green Bank to assess housing, energy, and transportation burden in CT. As we and many of you understand, assistance funds alone – which are typically about \$80-90M annually – are no match for our annual affordability gap, which was about \$450M in 2020. Efficiency and clean energy must be part of the solution. This bill acknowledges these challenges, and presents straight forward approaches to tackling them.

Reporting from Eversource and the CT Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) indicates that between 23-30% of Low- and Moderate-Income

households who seek energy efficiency upgrades – which they have funded as ratepayers through their electricity bills – contain too many safety hazards for upgrades to be completed. We applaud the breadth of work that this committee, DEEP, the EEB, and other stakeholders have led to bring these challenges to light, and to collaboratively develop solutions to address them. It is essential that we find ways to better include and amplify the concerns of LMI residents who subsidize conservation and energy efficiency programs on their electric bills, yet can't draw out the funds they've paid into because their homes aren't safe for upgrades.

As the legislation moves forward, please ensure timely and efficient coordination and information sharing across the Departments of Economic & Community Development (DECD), Health, and Housing to ensure that the funding is deployed quickly and transparently. Public visibility will show the benefits of the program, and allow stakeholders to analyze the system in real time and make adjustments when necessary. This is especially important when this legislature is not in session.

Reading through the bill, we want to raise a few points that we ask you to consider.

First, the application process: How will homes be chosen? What is an appropriate split between rented and owned homes? How do people apply in a way that maintains system integrity but doesn't place undue burdens on eligible households? We ask that you ensure a broad representation of stakeholders to address these questions. We recommend that the departments consult the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board, which comprises advocates, Community Action Agencies, utilities, state agencies, and others who are deeply familiar with energy affordability and housing conditions for low-income communities in CT.

Second, we applaud the goal of reaching 500 homes in the first year, and Operation Fuel offers our experience and networks to help achieve this goal. Depending on how much work needs to happen in a given home, the program will likely require more funding. We recommend a flexible mechanism that could increase program funds in response to tracked success of the program.

Third, we especially appreciate the committee's efforts to ensure that the bill would incorporate existing programs, stakeholders, and structures, including Conservation & Load Management, Energy Efficiency Board, Low Income Energy Advisory Board, and CT contractors currently engaged in hazard remediation, weatherization, and energy efficiency work. To boost green retrofit industry in CT, and expand workforce opportunities, we recommend the bill's contractor qualifications include work experience and training, not just higher education credentials.

Overall, we applaud the leadership of this committee and thank you for bringing Raised Bill 6653 to the public hearing today. Operation Fuel supports this bill, along with other efforts to improve the living conditions for low- and moderate-income residents across our state. Thank you for your service.

Brenda Watson, MA
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