

Testimony before Senate Appropriations
Tuesday, April 5, 2016

Jan Demers, Executive Director
Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity

Thank you for the time and opportunity to come before you. We are most grateful for the actions that the House accomplished by piecing funding and taking the steps to raise the gross receipt tax and enable a slight increase in funding for the Weatherization program. The primary funding source for the Weatherization program, the GRT, has seen a sharp decline in revenues since 2014 due to low fuel prices and a warmer winter. Weatherization is the long term solution for all Vermonters and especially for those Vermonters who have low income. In addition to saving energy and lessening our carbon imprint it reduces the financial burden of those we serve at CVOEO to enable them to pay other bills, purchase ongoing medications and take one more step to stability. There are no disadvantages or shortcomings to the Weatherization program. It is wholly positive.

However, the other side of the equation and the one that stares us in the face every day is that of crisis. This is where LIHEAP resides. The House did not make allowances for fuel assistance or the crisis fuel needs of those from 150 to 200 percentage of the Federal Poverty Level. That requires State funding. These are the people who are on the edge – on the very edge. The research shows that giving the right amount of money at the right time will keep these folks on more stable footing. These are the families who are coming to us right now with their electricity disconnections. They are not only coming to CVOEO but to each Community Action Agency across the state. These families, single parents, and elderly couples don't have the fuel that they need for their furnaces so they have been using electric space heaters to keep warm. This is not only a safety hazard but it drives up their bills exponentially which puts them in the situation of an electric disconnection. It is a cycle that can be broken with the right amount of money at the right time. Not providing state funding for this group of people is in itself a crisis.

Please consider the result of pitting one person in poverty against another person in poverty: of reducing benefits for those in poverty driving them into crisis situations or not investing in the long term solution of weatherization. We can't

choose one over the other. Unless there is balance between maintaining the safety net for those in crisis and the long term solutions there will not be stability.

Thank you for considering the options for balance.