

Testimony of Jim Slusher
Executive Director
Mid Columbia Community Action Council, Inc.
for the
Senate Special Committee on Aging

Members of the Committee Good Afternoon, My Name is Jim Slusher I am the Executive Director for Mid Columbia Community Action Council, Inc. A small private non-profit Community Action Agency located in North Central Oregon along the Columbia River Gorge. Our Agency serves three rural counties, with our mission being to alleviate the causes and conditions of poverty that exist in our area.

I am also here today representing Oregon's eighteen Community Action Agencies (CAA's) and we want to let you know about the rising cost of energy for Seniors and People with Disabilities and the impact it has their lives. Not only from a financial standpoint, but also from a health and safety issue.

In the past year our region has seen the price of home heating oil increase by at least 61%, natural gas prices by 18% just this past fall, coupled with another 18.7% increase just a few years ago. In addition Oregon's two largest electric utilities have raised their rates between 16%-20% and currently have requests into the Oregon PUC for small rate increases this fall.

These rising energy costs have a dramatic effect on senior's lives, as they are often faced with difficult choices between heating their homes, purchasing necessary prescription drugs or eating healthy balanced nutritious meals. I believe we can and should do something about seniors not having to worry about staying warm in the winter, by providing more resources to help this growing demand.

In January Oregon's Community Action Agencies produce a snapshot report on the status of the energy assistance situation. This report clearly shows that Oregon's has over 25,000 households waiting for assistance, but with no money to help them, and many of these households are seniors.

My agency operates the federal Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) as well as Oregon's own Energy Assistance program (OEA) this past year over 68% of our funds assisted senior or disabled households. This leaves very little funding for the general low-income population for families who have children under the age of six in the household, over the age of six and many working poor households.

More seniors accessing this has been a growing trend the past few years and recognizing as more seniors continue to access the program, it will leave even less assistance for the general population.

In addition to the federal LIEAP dollars of about \$23M, Oregon raises an additional \$15 in energy assistance money through our low-income energy assistance meter charge, otherwise our situation would be much worse than it currently is.

I would like to thank the Senators and Congressmen who have recognized the need for low-income energy assistance and who have helped fight for more LIEAP funding, which is sorely needed.

I personally want to thank Oregon's Senators Gordon Smith and Ron Wyden for their hard work in fighting to get more LIEAP funds released, allowing us to help thousands more people who would have otherwise gone without.

In closing I would like to leave you with this thought, what can government do to help? We have a couple of obvious options, one, work on getting the prices of energy lowered or reduced, or two, by raising the amount of the current energy assistance budget to meet the growing demand.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today to speak before you on the important issue of the dramatic rising energy costs and it's effects on low-income seniors.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.

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