

Help take the chill out of winter for local families in need

You can help local families stay warm this winter by supporting the statewide emergency energy assistance program – **Operation Fuel**. It's easy.

- Just add \$1 to your energy bill, or
- make a donation by enclosing a check – payable to Operation Fuel – and sending it to our office, or
- make a donation on our secure web site – www.operationfuel.org

Please consider supporting a program that does a lot of good right here at home. You can make the difference!

Yes, I would like to help people who are struggling to help themselves.

I have added \$1 to my bill

I would like to donate directly to Operation Fuel. My gift of \$_____ is enclosed.

Please mail contributions to Operation Fuel, 26 Wintonbury Avenue, Bloomfield CT 06002 or use the enclosed envelope

Operation Fuel, Inc.

26 Wintonbury Avenue

Bloomfield, CT 06002

(860) 243-2345

operationfuel.org



NON PROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
HARTFORD CT
PERMIT NO 920

Operation Fuel Mission Statement

The mission of Operation Fuel, Inc. is to provide emergency energy assistance to people within the state of Connecticut who are in financial crisis and who are not eligible for governmental assistance. This basic social justice mission, whether rooted in a religious or secular tradition, grants us the opportunity to alleviate some of the suffering of our brothers and sisters who are in need. Such assistance shall be given in accordance with the guidelines but with flexibility to meet human needs.

Visit our Web Site at www.operationfuel.org

SPREADING THE WORD

Legislators Pass Energy Assistance Package

IN A SPECIAL SESSION at the state Capitol, lawmakers created a sales tax holiday that started on the day after Thanksgiving and ends on March 31. As part of the assistance package, no sales tax will be charged on a wide variety of home-weatherization products, including programmable thermostats, caulking, and insulation.

In addition, consumers can purchase water heaters, natural gas furnaces and replacement windows that meet federal energy efficiency standards without being charged sales tax.

The sales tax program is open to all state residents regardless of income level, whether they are living in a Greenwich mansion or in a small home in eastern Connecticut. By contrast, the bulk of the heating assistance money will go to eligible households in various state programs that are based on income guidelines.



Left: Governor Jodi Rell addresses the media regarding the proposed Energy Assistance Bill.

Above: Chris Frances of WTIC News Talk 1080 interviews Rick Weiner of the Greenwich Fuel Bank and Joanne Balaschak of New Opportunities in Waterbury, who is also an Operation Fuel Board Member.

Wolf Pack Rocks!



Volunteers of all ages help Operation Fuel staff collect donations and raise awareness at a Wolf Pack hockey game



Pat Wrice makes new friends at a recent hockey game

The Hartford Wolf Pack raised \$1,900 for Operation Fuel during a recent hockey game. The money was raised through donations collected at the entrances by the Hartford Fire Department's Explorers Post One and Operation Fuel volunteers, the Hartford Wolf Pack's Chuck-a-Puck contest and a matching grant from the Hartford Wolf Pack Community Foundation. Operation Fuel needs to raise more than \$1 million dollars to meet anticipated requests for fuel assistance from Connecticut residents this winter, according to Pat Wrice, Executive Director. During the 2004 winter season, Operation Fuel provided more than \$800,000 in emergency aid through its

network of fuel banks. This year, the need will be greater because of higher energy prices. Operation Fuel is particularly busy after April 15 when the state program shuts down and the temperature is still cold. Many people have nowhere else to turn for help after the state program is finished for the season. Operation Fuel accepts applications until May 31. "We really appreciate that the Hartford Wolf Pack held this night for us. Besides raising money, it helped to raise awareness that there are people who need help paying their energy bills," said Pat Wrice. For more information, visit www.operationfuel.org.

Spreading the Warmth

LAST YEAR, 86% OF EACH DOLLAR spent at Operation Fuel went to our emergency energy assistance program. We are able to keep our overhead so low because of our voluntary fuel bank network. All of our 61 fuel banks administer this energy assistance program on a voluntary basis. These fuel banks provide an important link because they are in direct contact with people in crisis. Fuel bank directors stay in constant communication with the Operation Fuel office and relay to us the needs of the clients. All fuel bank directors meet annually to discuss the issues facing the network. This year the meeting was held at the Pond House in

West Hartford.

Last heating season, Operation Fuel assisted over 10,000 Connecticut residents stay warm – almost half of those were children. Every dollar makes an important difference. We have received generous support from local corporations and foundations, and we truly appreciate their generosity. We are experiencing record high energy costs and are working hard to raise funds for those in need of assistance. With help from local foundations, corporations and individuals, we are able to assist families in crisis to remain in their homes and make it through the winter months.

Some of the prestigious firms that have supported Operation Fuel this year are recognized below. Please ask about matching donations where you work.



New Britain

Once again, The American Savings Bank Foundation has rallied around those in need in the New Britain and Waterbury areas, two of our busiest regions. Operation Fuel received a \$50,000 grant from the American Savings Bank Foundation. This grant will help financially strapped people pay their heating bills and stay warm this long, cold winter. This grant will make an important difference in a year when we expect to have an even higher level of need than last year. Operation Fuel has awarded almost \$12 million in grants to over 65,000 households throughout Connecticut since its founding in 1977.



Middletown

Similarly, the Liberty Bank Foundation has responded to those in need in their service area. The Liberty Bank Foundation has awarded a \$5,000 grant to Operation Fuel, Inc. to support their Emergency Energy Assistance Program. "The focus of the Foundation is to provide for the basic needs of the people of low income," said Nancy Faraci, manager of Liberty's Middletown office. "Keeping people warm during the cold months is about as basic as it gets and we're glad to be able to help."

The faces behind the fuel banks
(photos from the Operation Fuel Statewide Meeting held in October):



Charlene Taylor, Program Supervisor of the Energy Service Unit at DSS and Operation Fuel Board Member, Lindsay Parke of Northeast Utilities and Operation Fuel Board Member and Rose DelGado of the Mary Knowles Memorial Fund Bank in New Britain.



Milton Cook of the New London Energy Line Fuel Bank and Naomi McClure of the Groton Emergency Energy Fund Member.



Sharon Willard Of New Haven and Ellen McAuliffe of T.E.A.M. in Derby.



Janice Richardson and Rose DelGado of the Mary Knowles Memorial Fund Bank in New Britain.

DROWNING IN POVERTY CLOSER TO HOME

by Helen Ubinas, Courtesy of the Hartford Courant, reprinted by permission

WILLIE ROBINSON HELPED UNLOAD boxes of everything imaginable from cars that lined up at the state Armory: water, diapers, clothes, a big stuffed bunny.

He was there Tuesday with co-workers, but there was a time Robinson could have used a little help himself. It's been five years since he was homeless, he told me. Long enough to put it behind him, but not so long that he can't remember wondering where his next meal was coming from. Where he'd sleep at night. If he'd ever be able to get back on his feet.

If the early pictures coming out of the crisis in New Orleans showed the incredible divide between the have and have-nots, the pictures from Connecticut and elsewhere in the nation now show what happens when the people of this country rally.

Locally, New Haven is making plans to house a few hundred people. A West Hartford councilwoman plans to introduce a resolution to house displaced people in town. Kids all over the state are raising cash selling everything from lemonade to cupcakes.

And over at the Armory, they can't empty the cars fast enough with all the donations pouring in.

"This is amazing," Robinson says, hurrying to unload another car.

He was right. It was a wonderfully overwhelming display of generosity. It was also proof positive that our ability to come to the aid of folks thousands of miles away is matched only by our ability to avert our eyes from what's right in front of us.

Watching the donations and volunteers pour into the Armory, I couldn't help but wonder: What if we put forth this kind of effort to feed and house the homeless and less fortunate right here? Would 32,000 people in the state — 40 percent of them children — face homelessness every year? Would 600 households in the Capitol Region find themselves facing life without a roof over their head? Would we need to commission a group to come up with plan to end homelessness by 2015? Robinson smiled, "When you look at it that way, I guess not. But I don't think people see homelessness in their neighborhood the same way they do in some place far away."

So instead of using the tragedy in New Orleans to prompt a conversation about

the vulnerable in our own state, we have Gov. M. Jodi Rell heading a hurricane drill, Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez inviting reporters to a briefing on the city's flood control system and HUD officials calling around Connecticut looking for shelter beds for Katrina evacuees.

"They didn't seem to realize how full the shelters are already and how people are being turned away from shelters in Connecticut every day," said Janice Elliott, director of the Connecticut chapter of the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Diane Randall, at the Partnership for Strong Communities, said as hokey as it might sound, it's not a matter of opening our homes, colleges or public housing. It's about opening our hearts — or perhaps more accurately, our eyes — to the precarious situation of the vulnerable all around us.

For some reason, we have trouble doing that. It's easier to drop off a check, a case of water or a few bags of diapers for the victims in New Orleans and feel like we did our part. Easier to avert our eyes when the calamity is just the daily drip, drip, drip of poverty all around us.

Easier to look at the people in New Orleans and think, they are the truly unfortunate ones, the victims of an act of God. It's not their fault. Folks aren't so sure about that when it comes to the poor nearer to home.

"Unfortunately, people view the needy as deserving and undeserving," said Elliott. If that's the case, then it's time we get familiar with some numbers. Of the 688 occupations tracked by the state Department of Labor, 324 don't pay a median wage high enough for a worker to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment without spending more than 30 percent of his income. The number of Connecticut families living in poverty swelled by 11 percent in the past two years, compared with 2 percent nationwide. Those without medical insurance in the state grew by 5 percent, compared with a 2 percent rise nationally.

Translation: There are good, hard-working people just trying to keep their heads above water.

And maybe we should help them before they're floating past us.

Helen Ubinas' column appears Thursdays and Sundays and alternate Tuesdays. She can be reached at Ubinas@courant.com.



A Word from the Executive Director

On December 1st, Operation Fuel began its 30th year of providing emergency energy assis-

tance to low income households. This year we anticipate getting requests from more than 10,000 families and individuals—almost double last year's demand. When Governor Ella Grasso helped start Operation Fuel in 1977, it was supposed to be a short-term program. But here we are, almost 30 years later, and the need for our services has grown tremendously. On our first day of operation, we already had requests totaling nearly \$200,000.

We looked forward to this winter with both cautious optimism and concern. We were optimistic that the generous people of our state will come through and we will be able to raise our goal of \$1.2 million.

We were concerned that if we did not meet our goals many people who need us would have fewer options or none at all to get help for their high-energy bills. We help families and individuals who are going through an economic hardship such as a serious illness or recent unemployment. For some people we are a last resort. They have nowhere else to turn. These are our friends and neighbors. The least we can do is help them stay warm in their own homes.

With mixed feelings we increased our annual grant per household from \$275 to \$400. Operation Fuel is happy to be able to offer more assistance to a family or individual. But the increase also shows how much tougher things are economically.

So far this winter we have seen an outpouring of generosity from our friends and neighbors. However, much of winter is still ahead of us... **We are not out of the woods yet.** But, I firmly believe that with everyone's help, we can prevent some of the tragedies we saw in 1977 when Operation Fuel was created.

From Heart to Hearth,

Patricia Wrice, Executive Director