

I am indeed honored to be here this afternoon. It's good to see so many of my friends from Pennsylvania. I am very grateful to Virginia Knauer and all the member organizations of the Energy and the Aged Consortium for providing this opportunity to discuss the desperate need for comprehensive energy relief for older Americans.

As Chairman of the Special Committee on Aging, I am here to express my grave concern for the plight of elderly Americans this winter. Right now there are 3.9 million older Americans living below the poverty line. When we as a nation decided that in order to achieve a realistic energy policy, we would have to pay the replacement cost of energy or go without, we did so with a concern for protecting those on low and fixed incomes from its harsh effects. Now, after oil deregulation we find little or no success in meeting our proclaimed responsibility for protecting the elderly and the poor from astronomical increases in home fuel costs that are causing grave hardship and in some cases even death.

You know, every year we are subjected to a barrage of statistics, and this winter there have been some grim ones: temperatures have been lower, snow fall higher, traffic deaths are up. You hear about this from the newspapers or on the six o'clock news, but there are some other statistics you don't hear so much about. For example, we know that the elderly poor pay one-third of their incomes on home fuel, and as much as half of their incomes in the northeastern states like my own state of Pennsylvania. In contrast, the average American household spends less than one-tenth of its income on fuel.

We know that high fuel prices have been an incentive to conservation for many Americans, but here are really two kinds of conservation. There's investing in storm windows and attic insulation and weather stripping -- but that is only for those who can afford it. For the elderly poor, cutting back on fuel consumption too often means shutting off rooms, using the oven for heat, or, when all else fails, falling victim to fatal hypothermia.

In 1977 almost 1,000 people died as a direct result of excessive cold. Experts tell us that's just the tip of the iceberg, and hypothermia may be the root cause of death for as many as 25,000 older Americans each year. These people are often unwitting accomplices in their own death. By that I mean, they try to conserve on costly fuel because of the pressures on their income, and frequently they pay for their conservation efforts with their lives.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When we grappled with the problem of energy shortages and dependence on foreign oil, and as President Carter decided that decontrol of oil was in the national interest, to free us all from OPEC's control, the Administration and Members of Congress and you, the representatives of elderly groups and energy suppliers, we all acknowledged an overriding responsibility that the elderly and the most vulnerable in our society would not pay the price of our national energy problems. We enacted the Windfall Profits Tax and we specifically proclaimed that a substantial amount of it be used to help fund low income home energy assistance. The logic of that action was clear and -- in my judgement -- compelling. With that declaration

Congress said that the benefits of decontrol would be shared with those who suffer from decontrol.

That was the theory. Right now it seems a lot more like theory than practice. We look a lot like Pontius Pilate, assuaging our guilt and our nagging responsibility with a program-- and then washing our hands of the whole thing through steady reductions funding because the government supposedly can't afford it. Last year, proposals came before Congress to reduce the Low Income Energy Assistance Program from \$1.8 billion to \$1.4 billion, and to eliminate the weatherization program entirely. Congress didn't buy that last year; we funded energy assistance and \$1.75 billion and weatherization at almost \$150 million. But there's every indication these cuts will be proposed again this year. To backtrack on our promises to the poor and elderly, those whose survival is at stake, is not only unfair, it undermines the credibility and even the legitimacy of our government.

Now, I'm not saying that there isn't waste, fraud, and abuse in energy assistance and weatherization programs. I'm not saying there aren't ways to improve either initiative. In fact, as Chairman of the Committee on Aging I held series of hearings last year on Federal energy assistance programs, as a result of which our Committee developed and supported provisions in the current law that target benefits more directly to those in need, give priority to the elderly and handicapped, and assure that States will have enough flexibility to design programs responsive to local needs. The beneficial impact of these changes are beginning to register, judging from preliminary reports from States that more

elderly are being served and that fuel assistance currently pays between 15 and 50 percent of the heating bills of participating households.

The fact is, however, even if these programs ran perfectly, they would be totally inadequate. The size of the needy population is staggering. With regard to weatherization, the Department of Energy estimates some 12 million eligible households remain to be served. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates roughly 18 million households are eligible this year for low income energy assistance. We currently serve a fraction of them. Frankly, Federal programs today are the proverbial drop in the bucket. It is therefore no surprise that a Harris Poll commissioned last fall by the National Council on Aging for the White House Conference on Aging found 43% of the elderly today consider energy costs their most serious problem, ahead of crime, health, and general finances; this despite conventional wisdom that states the fear of crime and the burden of health costs, which the elderly pay 36% out of pocket, are the biggest concerns. The White House Conference itself included among its recommendations a 6-point resolution calling for immediate, practical help for the elderly and handicapped unable to cope with every-increasing fuel prices. Furthermore, White House delegates specifically urged oil companies and utilities to explore methods of preventing cut-offs during cold weather.

So my message to you is simply this. We -- as a nation -- must acknowledge our shared responsibility to help the elderly and those with low incomes meet the burden of today's energy costs, and we must do it with continued Federal financial support. We

must pursue administrative improvements that cut down on waste and red tape and allow States discretion to structure their programs efficiently.

But even then our efforts will be inadequate to the need. And that is the challenge to you who represent the interests of suppliers and consumers. I believe your diverse interests converge in certain critical aspects. Many of you who are energy suppliers have demonstrated interest and compassion in easing the burden on the most hard-pressed customers. In my home State of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Power and Light is offering consumer referral and assistance services in order to prevent shut-offs and avoid the vast expense of building new capacity. They are transferring the cost of new capacity to support conservation. Some utilities have provided below-market or no-interest loans for weatherization. I commend you for such efforts. They benefit both energy suppliers and consumers. But even these are not enough. The challenge before us all is to expand existing efforts -- and find new means as well -- to share the costs and benefits of conservation and reach the poorest elderly.

And that is what I hope we will all gain from a meeting such as this, your commitment and the hundreds of ideas in your heads about how the partnership between government, private industry, and the consumer can be made to work for those who will suffer -- and even die -- if it doesn't happen.

We at the Special Committee on Aging look forward to working with all of you.