Good afternoon. Thank you all for joining our town hall today. My name is Brenda Watson, Operation Fuel's Executive Director. For over 40 years, Operation Fuel has provided emergency energy utility assistance for those struggling to keep up with the rising cost of energy. In addition to that, we studied energy burden over the years so that we design and structure our programs to meet people where they are as it’s critically important that their voices help guide how we structure our programs. We are also in the process of studying water and transportation cost burdens as these issues are all connected. Stay tuned to hear more about that study in the fall. When Dr. Bozzi reached out in August, last August, about a collaboration between Yale and the Vermont Law School, studying energy burden and insecurity in our state, I was of course totally on board. On behalf of the Operation Fuel board of directors and staff, I want to thank Dr. Laura Bozzi, Director of Programs at the Yale Center for Climate Change and Health.
and faculty advisor on this project.

I’d like to thank Erika Kim, Sarah Gledhill, Jhena Viglass, Epongou Ekile, Kimberley Mashke, Olivia St. Pierre for their hard work and efforts on this project. I’d also like to thank Gannon Long, Kiana Stokes and Tanya Anderson of Operation Fuel for supporting this effort on top of the work they already do every day. And as we dive into this work you’ll hear more about the process of planning that these focus groups was involved, the work that was involved in planning these focus groups and that this research study was evaluated and approved by Yale’s Institutional Review Board.

This approval meant that the study methods were deemed ethical and would not in any way harm participants. Please note that this survey is not being conducted on behalf of any energy supply company. All the information and feedback gathered are the voices of the participants. We look forward to a thoughtful discussion, but what I would love most is turning those thoughts into action. We encourage you to think about how you can hashtag use your power for good.
and keep the power on for the most vulnerable in our state.

From here, I’d like to now turn it over to the students,

Jhena, in particular, to take it away.

Actually I will start.

So, my name is Epongue Ekile and I’m part of the student team that will be presenting today. And I’ll also be the moderator.

This slide will show the overview of our agenda for today.

If someone could go to that and Brenda already gave an introduction.

And so we have collaborated with Operation Fuel this semester to hold focus groups with Connecticut residents to speak about their experiences with energy insecurity.

Just a reminder to everyone to please put yourself on mute if not speaking.

And also please note that this presentation is being recorded.

As questions come up, you can put them in the chat.

And I will keep an eye on that.

As you can see, we will have a pause for questions.

part way through the presentation and again, at the end of the presentation.

When we stop for question and answer, I’ll take questions from the chat.

And Jhena can start now.
Great, thank you so much Epongue.

So thank you all so much for joining us for our presentation today about energy, justice and health in a changing climate. Our team consists of students from the Yale School of the Environment, Yale School of Public Health and Vermont Law School.

So today we’ll start off with understanding why is energy important? It provides us with a lot of basic essential household services, like cooking, lighting, bathing, cleaning, heating, and cooling our houses and supporting life-sustaining medical devices.

Energy insecurity can be defined in a variety of ways, but in the literature it’s been defined as the inability to meet these basic household energy needs. And this can be expressed in either affordability or the reliability of having consistent access to energy.

Regarding affordability in the literature, it states that residents who spend above 6 to 10% of their income are considered energy burdened. And in Connecticut specifically, we have the highest retail electricity rate in the continental US, which is the price that residents pay for electricity.
and low income residents in the state can pay up to 26% of their income on household energy bills.

We also experience frequent power outages in the state because of our aging power grid and it also being a heavily forested state.

So our study aimed to focus on these issues in Connecticut and to hear residents stories and experiences with energy insecurity, as well as their thoughts on how to move forward and potential policy solutions.

As a joint undertaking between Vermont Law School and Yale School of Public Health and Operation Fuel, we hope to bring these residents voices and lived experiences into the conversation around energy insecurity in Connecticut.

Right, next slide please.

So just an overview of the demographics of our participants.

Over the course of about a month, we conducted 10 focus groups with 22 participants in total.

Our participants ranged in age from 31 to 71, and about 30% reported that they do not have any air conditioning.

The majority of our participants used electric or gas for their heating with about a quarter using oil.
And while the majority of our participants lived in New Haven, we did interview residents from West Hartford, Berlin, Fairfield, East Haven, Stonington, Hamden and Windham. And finally, about two thirds of our participants identified as Black, about a quarter of our participants identified as White and 14% identified as Hispanic, Latinx. And now I will hand it off to my colleague, Erika, to go through our methodology and kind of what we did for this study. So, like Brenda mentioned in the beginning, our study was reviewed and approved by the IRB at Yale. So it was deemed an ethical and safe study. Partnering with our community partners at Operation Fuel, as well as some community liaison partners throughout the state of Connecticut. We worked to recruit participants in a series of focus groups about energy costs. And so, because our project was rooted in community-based research principles, we often conferred with Operation Fuel.
throughout the study design to obtain feedback, guidance and input, kind of every step of the way of what we were doing. And that’s what’s demonstrated via the flow chart on the right-hand side. Our focus group questions explored three main topics. So, perspective surrounding energy insecurity, knowledge of energy assistance programs, kind of what exists out there, whether or not people have utilized these programs, things like that. And then also knowledge about weatherization and energy-efficiency solutions. And after we conducted these focus groups, we took the transcripts. So everything that was said during these focus groups and we analyzed them and we created, we identified major themes in those transcripts and those became what we call key domains. And so, our key domains that we’ll be talking about in the following slides are health factors, social dynamics, financial strategies and coping mechanisms, environmental factors and building concerns and assistance channels and accessibility. And with that, I will pass it on to my colleague, Olivia.

Hi everyone.
So I’m gonna share some general findings about the health factors. So to start us off, we found a general finding that participants with medical vulnerability experienced a higher burden when navigating energy insecurity. Many of the participants shared the sentiment that access to reliable and affordable energy should be universally accessible, and protected, regardless of whether one has a medical condition or not. And participants shared that in general, their reliance on refrigeration impacts their nutritional choices, their health, and several participants shared that they require refrigeration to store medications and specially-prescribed diets. The utility companies do offer protections and often rely on it for medical devices. And the utility companies do offer protections.
from shutoff in limited cases of serious illness and life-threatening conditions when documented, but participants shared frustrations with the limitations of these structural safeguards. They also expressed frustrations with navigating the paperwork if they’re not regularly seen by a primary physician. We also found that health factors, financial stress and shutoffs compound anxiety and mental health. So participants shared that the stress of high bills also manifests through physical sickness. Additionally, high energy cost burdens lead participants to having to make difficult decisions between health and electricity. So this includes choosing to visit the doctors less, struggling to keep a vehicle as a handicapped person, who relies on transportation for medical needs, and choosing not to purchase certain medications or medical equipments in order to prioritize paying the energy bill. So this quote on the side here says, "Facing high bills is anxiety inducing. It just is."
It makes me sick. I’m considering just living in the dark for some months.”
And then another participant said, “It stresses me out. I lose sleep because I’m worrying about how I’m going to pay for these lights and gas. It’s scary because once you’ve had your lights turned out once before, that’s what you’re looking forward to again, if you don’t pay the lights.” Participants also reported feeling shame and stigma around not being able to pay energy bills.

One of the next domains that we explored was social dynamics. So, we found that one’s navigation of familial, residential, social and faith relationships may all impact experiences with energy insecurity. Even if assistance is accessible, a sense of pride, embarrassment and awareness of stigmas tied to poverty and disability can be an obstacle for seeking help or talking openly about their experiences with energy insecurity. Participants also reported feeling shame and stigma around not being able to pay energy bills. Parents specifically expressed a difficulty in navigating conversations about energy insecurity with their children.
about being a burden on their family when needing to rely on family for assistance. Our participants also resonated with feelings of isolation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and shared that during hard times, whether that’s due to shut off, extreme weather events or pandemic that their neighbors and landlords made their residential communities either better or worse and definitely impacted their perception of feeling supported. So, there’s some quotes on the side there about living in shutoff and extreme weather events. And I have one more that I’d like to read out loud, which is what one participant shared, "Luckily I had my mother to help me out, but it’s still very stressful having to rely on people, having to live in the dark, having to explain to your child why you’re living in the dark and it stays with you. I think I made a vow of myself back then that I was never gonna let myself get in that situation again and knock on wood I’ve kept that.” And I will pass it back to Epongue, our moderator.

Great. Thank you, Olivia.
Thanks to everyone who’s presented so far. So, we have a lot of information today. So we wanted to pause here for questions for about 10 minutes before we finish the presentation. After this break, we’ll present on financial strategies, coping mechanisms, environmental factors, building maintenance concerns and assistance channels. So please feel free to add your question in the chat now.

Okay, so we have a question. Did we have people with limited English in our focus groups? If anyone from the team wants to answer that. So we did have the ability to do focus groups in Spanish, but we didn’t get any interest in that.

So all the focus groups were conducting in English. Did individuals find that fuel assistance relieved or added stress around the issue of shame?

A very good question. If anyone else wants to answer. I can take a first pass at that. And then if any of my colleagues have anything to add, please feel free.

So, my sense from the focus groups that I participated in was that receiving assistance did add a bit
To the feeling of shame and stress, especially if people were receiving assistance from family members or some also said that they essentially borrowed from themselves. So, like taking loans from their own savings or retirement accounts. And so, there was this sense of needing to pay themselves back or needing to pay family members back and feeling a sense of stress around that experience.

Yeah, I think that pretty much sums it up for all of us that participated in the focus groups. "How were the focus groups designed?" I think, Erika, you can answer that.

So, in terms of how we designed the focus group questions, what we were going to ask and base our focus groups on, this project has been an ongoing thing for the past year. So prior to, just when we started these in February.

What was done by our energy justice team last year was we conducted like a literature review. So we looked for all existing pieces of research or other forms of literature that looked at energy insecurity in Connecticut.
What the team found was that there is not much and what the team basically concluded is that there is a really strong need for us to actually go out and ask people about their experiences with paying for energy bills in this state. And so, that literature review is kind of what informed the questions we decided to ask. And the three major topic areas that we decided to focus on. And as for conducting the focus groups in general, so we spent a bit of time making connections with different community liaisons throughout the state who kind of had their own little social networks. And through those networks, we recruited our participants. So we aimed to recruit a bunch of people from different communities, urban, suburban and rural throughout the state. And that’s kind of how we got into contact with our participants. Great, next question.

"Is there a one-stop or go-to list of energy, water assistance resources in English and in Spanish that could be available in all of the state’s health departments?"
I can also take a first stab at this.

So, from our understanding, there is not a one-stop, go-to list. We know that that would be really helpful. And that was one of our goals for this project for this semester.

Unfortunately, I don't think we have the time to put that together, but potentially, this project will continue over the summer a bit. And so, the person who will take that on may be able to work on it.

But that has seemed like a major need for this area, but also requires a lot of maintenance.

So, just to make sure that the list is up to date.

And so, it does require staff time and funding to maintain that, which obviously is difficult in this area.

And then the health departments, I'm not sure if they are coordinated. I'm not sure if Brenda or Gannon from Operation Fuel would want to answer that question.

Hi, Brenda here, as far as health departments go,

I am unsure of their awareness around these issues.

I do know that DSS is the administrator of the state's energy assistance program.

So they're aware.
And the Department of DCF, Department of Children and Families, they actually have a program in which if they are interacting with a family who’s struggling with energy burden, they have funding set aside that will help pay down a bill or make a delivery of oil or other types of fuel if that would help that family avoid a situation where the child needs to be removed. I also, one other piece, not necessarily health departments, but Hartford Hospital in particular, they have social workers on staff and they’re aware of Operation Fuel. They’re probably aware of the state’s energy assistance program as well. And they do try to connect families who are discharging from the hospital, if there’s a vulnerable family member in the home, there’s no power in the home. They will try to connect that family with one of the programs or perhaps even both, Operation Fuel and the state’s energy assistance. Great, I think there’s another question later in the chat. that is kind related to this for the resource list, are the utility support supposed to supply this
or should the EnergizeCT website should that be updated?

I think, yes.

I think websites should be updated perhaps all the time.

This environment is constantly changing.

Program dates are constantly changing and requirements change.

So, anytime you can utilize your resource, which is a website to update folks on programs that are available to them, then yes, the EnergizeCT website could use a bit of a makeover to address these issues, and inform people of the programs that are available.

And if I could just add to that.

Thank you to Stephanie Cohan from Connecticut PURA, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority.

And she’s put in the chat, a website that does lay out some of the utility assistance programs available to folks.

So, folks can see that in the chat as well.

Great, you can answer a few more questions.

Let’s see.

"Was there anyone on our team that have experienced some of these hardships and could therefore relate to the residents?"

I’m happy to take a stab at this answer.

So, I’m not from Connecticut originally.
In terms of electricity costs, I come from the state that has, I think, the highest residential electricity costs in the nation, which is Hawaii. And so, for all my life, like my family's utility bills our electricity bills were like hundreds and hundreds of dollars every single month. And my family was just in like mounds of debt, my whole life because of this. And so, when we were listening in these focus groups to our participants talk about their experiences, not only paying for electricity, but also heat, gas, things like that, and it all adding up. Yeah, I was definitely able to relate and I have never used, had to use gas or heat coming from a tropical environment it's hot there, so we don't need heat. And so, that was like another perspective that I just didn't even know about. And it was a great experience and really emotional, like being able to listen to these experiences. <v->Great.</v> All right, I think we can move on. There are a lot of questions still in the chat.
and we will try to get through all of them towards the end of the presentation, but thank you to everyone who’s submitted a question.

All right so, I’ll pass it on to Kim for financial strategies and coping mechanisms.

So, our next category we’d like to discuss, is financial strategies and coping mechanisms, which essentially covers the various strategic approaches that our participants took in order to make ends meet directly with energy costs as well as to balance energy costs in the greater scheme of financial constraints. So our participants are extremely aware of and concerned about how much energy they use at all times. And they are constantly going out of their way to reduce their consumption.

So many have developed a habit of unplugging as many appliances as possible. And some also avoid transportation as much as possible and avoid using energy during peak times during the evening. And often cook during off peak hours or minimize their comfort by going the entire day without heat. Paying for energy costs often affects our participant’s ability to afford other bills.
497 00:25:34.090 --> 00:25:36.670 and build up any sort of savings.
498 00:25:36.670 --> 00:25:39.410 So some are unable to save for retirement,
499 00:25:39.410 --> 00:25:42.120 while others are unable to afford more imme-
500 00:25:42.120 --> 00:25:44.400 and urgent costs such as doctor’s visits,
501 00:25:44.400 --> 00:25:46.803 rent or other utility bills.
502 00:25:47.860 --> 00:25:49.800 Sometimes known as heat or eat.
503 00:25:49.800 --> 00:25:51.750 Some participants were very transparent
504 00:25:51.750 --> 00:25:54.600 about sharing very challenging experiences,
505 00:25:54.600 --> 00:25:57.530 being faced with a choice to purchase food
506 00:25:57.530 --> 00:26:00.870 or pay for energy as illustrated by the top
507 00:26:00.870 --> 00:26:03.180 on the right-hand side of the slide.
508 00:26:03.180 --> 00:26:05.240 Some sought out stores with cheaper prices
509 00:26:05.240 --> 00:26:07.600 or supplemented with multiple food banks.
510 00:26:07.600 --> 00:26:10.130 And one participant who had a young child,
511 00:26:10.130 --> 00:26:13.290 ultimately chose to pay for the energy bill one
512 00:26:13.290 --> 00:26:15.163 instead of buying groceries.
513 00:26:17.190 --> 00:26:20.700 Participants often feel on the edge of debt
514 00:26:20.700 --> 00:26:23.000 in balancing so many costs at once.
515 00:26:23.000 --> 00:26:25.750 Some feel vulnerable to sudden budget in-
516 00:26:25.750 --> 00:26:27.810 creases.
517 00:26:27.810 --> 00:26:29.790 So for example, a homeowner was concerned
518 00:26:29.790 --> 00:26:32.130 and one renter spoke to a particularly
519 00:26:32.130 --> 00:26:33.910 financially strained time
520 00:26:33.910 --> 00:26:36.080 when her oldest child was heading to college
521 00:26:36.080 --> 00:26:38.520 and she also needed to pay for transportation
522 00:26:38.520 --> 00:26:39.660 to visit another child
523 00:26:39.660 --> 00:26:41.873 who was incarcerated at the time as well.
And mistrust of the utility was often a strong sentiment expressed by multiple people as demonstrated by the bottom quote on the right-hand side of the slide. For some, it is very difficult to comprehend how successful utility businesses that provides such essential services as energy could possibly need to charge such unaffordable bills to consumers. And why regularly putting an active effort towards limiting consumption doesn’t seem to successfully lower the bill amount for our participants.

Next slide please.

So the environmental factors category specifically covers our participants’ experiences related to season and weather. Hazardous temperatures during both summer and winter caused discomfort. Temperatures also often directly related to health.

And a few people spoke to air conditioning as an essential resource for managing asthma. And one person mentioned taking a medication that causes temperature sensitivity, and therefore requires a temperature-controlled living environment.

One participant spoke to feeling...
like coping strategies were a lose/lose situation. And during the summer she opened the blinds in order to avoid using electricity during the day. But having the blinds open caused the room to heat up, which created a need for air conditioning. Anticipation of power outages from severe weather events or other interruptions is stressful, especially because the ability to store perishable food is dependent on electricity for refrigeration. Food spoilage can be a disaster for people in these scenarios because food costs money and people do not always have the flexibility in their budgets to replace that spoiled food.

So now I’ll hand it off to my colleague, Sarah, to address building maintenance concerns. (indistinct) Thanks Kim. So, we asked participants in the focus groups about the condition of their homes and we heard a lot of horror stories.

Hi, seems that we’re experiencing some technical difficulties or is it just me? Can you, we might be. So I’ll just jump in for Sarah here. So, she started to mention that we heard some horror stories.
about building maintenance concerns. So for example, one participant shared, "My landlord told me when the ceiling was falling down on me to move out, he wasn’t fixing it.

I’ve been told to move out or shut up, basically.

They don’t do anything about the problem.”

The majority of participants are renters, so they have to go through their landlords for any maintenance issues.

We heard some stories of living conditions, being uncomfortably cold, unable to get adequate heat in the winter due to lack of insulation and air ceiling or too hot because of the cost of air conditioning being so high.

The quote here at the top describes.

"The utilities were definitely more expensive... and I used them way less than the other places because it was just so drafty.

It was like there was almost no point in putting the heat on because it didn’t stay.”

We heard about carbon monoxide leaks, mold, water leaks and generally that landlords respond very slowly if at all to these concerns.

Homeowners on the other hand, which were only a handful, were concerned about not having enough money to pay for upgrades.

So if a furnace goes out or something breaks,
the homeowners who participated are not able to afford those upgrades. One even discussed selling their home due to the financial stress.

Hi, can you guys hear me? Yes, you’re back. Okay, I’m back.

You can go to the next slide.

So, the last theme to talk about is access to assistance. So, we don’t have time to go over all the various assistance programs because I wanna focus on the participant experience with assistance. Generally, participants found the application processes to be difficult. So whether we’re talking about bill assistance, medical protection, winter protection or something else, participants have a really hard time applying for help.

There aren’t enough locations to apply. Applications are long and complicated. They don’t hear back for extended periods of time after their applications are sent in.

and they have to spend a significant amount of time and money applying. In addition, the outreach is not great.
Most people hear about these programs through word of mouth, rather than through good marketing. Once participants do access a form of assistance, at times the payments are still not affordable. For energy efficiency through home energy solutions, if the fee team finds a carbon monoxide leak or mold, they will stop work, which prevents participants from getting upgrades.

And you can go to the next slide. So, lastly participants talked a lot about how customer or client service is not great. So, whether it’s the utility or community action agency, participants have talked to staff who are not necessarily well trained on the assistance programs available. So customer service at the utility sometimes fails to record the conversation. So every time the participant calls, they have to start over. In addition, there’s lack of representation in utilities and community action agencies. So, participants discussed how the representatives they talked to rarely look like them or have been through what they’re going through. On a related note, when applying for assistance,
participants find the questioning to be invasive. So one participant was asked about the income of their neighbors and roommates in order to access weatherization. Another participant was asked about the income and criminal history of an ex-partner, who she no longer even had contact with. So neither of these participants continued with the process of getting assistance. Generally, we had participants who didn’t feel respected when they asked for assistance. Some had negative experiences say 15, 20 years ago, and they haven’t come back since. And others had really recent experiences with intrusive questioning. I’ll point out the powerful quote to the right here and invite you to read it. This goes to show that negative experiences can stick in someone’s memory for many years. And then, the last point here, when asked about energy efficiency or renewable energy, participants didn’t find these solutions to be accessible to them. Being mostly renters, they have trouble with their landlords investing in these technologies.
When trying to participate in a program, participants explained how mold or carbon monoxide or complicated applications halt any effort for energy efficiency. Homeowners feel that they can’t afford energy efficiency or renewable energy retrofits. So now I’ll turn it back over to Eponge to discuss participant suggestions. One practical solution was that landlords should be required to install heat pumps and efficient appliances when technology needs to be replaced. A lot of participants expressed interest and moving towards more energy-efficient appliances, but because they’re renters didn’t have the means to do that. Another was that energy companies should hire community members that have the personality to communicate personalized advice and solutions to people with empathy. Another participant suggested that utilities move the application opening date.
for winter protection up to allow for more time,
as well as creating drop boxes and email addresses
that are checked more regularly
to better facilitate the application process.
Another recommendation made by multiple participants,
regarded marketing and outreach.
They suggested that schools be a medium
through which information can be shared,
including about energy assistance programs.
They said that their children were old enough
to bring home flyers and information packets.
Other financial-related recommendations
were that the price of energy should be based on income
and that the income threshold should be increased
for income threshold for assistance should be increased
along with the addition of a transition period
for all assistance programs,
including food stamps and others.
Overall, the majority of recommendations
were made based in community.
Utilization of existing community networks
might be key to spreading the word
about energy assistance programs
and other avenues of assistance.
While having conversations with participants
and hearing their stories,
it became very apparent to us that
the issues they were voicing were much more than just about energy insecurity. All of their hardships had crosscutting themes in health and equity or inequity. Outages and shutoffs can lead to health problems. Because of these themes, it can be argued that tackling energy insecurity is about much more than just energy and has everything to do with problems within the system, especially poverty and lack of equitable opportunity. Basic needs should come first. Part of which includes affordable energy. It was apparent that many participants weren’t able to fulfill many of their basic needs due to high energy costs and felt like they were not supported by energy companies. However, during these focus groups, a lot of participants opted to share their contact information with each other in order to provide help and insight to whoever need it.
And this was a glimpse into the community-based solutions that some participants recommended and might be adopted. So, that is the end of our presentation. Thank you to the team. Before someone asks, we are planning to send the slides in the draft report out to everyone who registered today. So please keep an eye out for that email. We are also linking a survey. So if you could please take a moment to let us know your thoughts. Here are our acknowledgements. We obviously thank Operation Fuel and the names listed there for all their guidance. Definitely big thank you to Dr. Bozzi for her guidance and help throughout the last few months. I mean, thank you to our whole team. Thank you to the SNF Fund for the Integration of Theory and Practice for funding for this project. And most of all, thank you for our participants for sharing their stories. So, we’ll continue with questions and discussion if you’d like. So please put questions into the chat and we’ll keep answering the questions that are already there. Thank you.
And I received a message to show our team slides again.

So I’m gonna go back to our team really quickly.

I don’t have a question necessarily.

I just wanted to share.

This is Brenda Watson again.

How I am impressed with the work that you all have done this semester and you shed light on a part of the energy story that we often do not hear.

And we certainly do not plan for in terms of high-level planning on the state and utility side.

I’m hoping that folks take the information that they’ve learned today and consider making adjustments to their current programs.

I’m also really quite touched that the participants have decided to keep in touch.

Clearly, this was a process that bonded them.

And I want to thank you all and thank our participants for being brave enough to share their stories and you all providing them with the safe space to do that.

Okay.

Going back to some of the questions that were asked earlier, "Did you find that the people you spoke with
were knowledgeable of all the programs that are out there or were they limited by access to programs or wifi computers, etcetera?”

One of the team wants to answer that?

I’d be happy to start this answer and I’m sure someone on the team will have something to add.

In the focus groups that I attended and moderated, there was always one to two people who had kind of an extensive knowledge of available assistance programs and kind of how it worked. As the rest of the group were sharing their stories, it was those one to two people who would kind of step in and be like, hey, have you heard of this program? Have you heard of this program?

You should look this up. And so, that was kind of my experience. And I thought that was really cool. I think on average, there was not a great amount of knowledge about existing programs. But those few people in every focus group, kind of left everyone being more informed by the end of it.

Great, another question was,
"Did anyone express that they tried to reach out to the utility company for help such as payment plans or extensions?"

I can speak to that one. Yeah, I mean, people talked a lot about how they would try to reach out to the utility. A couple people had positive experiences, but overwhelmingly the experiences with the utility customer service were quite negative.

The feeling was that they had to start over every time they called and talked to a different representative. Sometimes the customer service agents weren’t well trained on the assistance programs available.

Great, another question. What types of information do applicants need to provide to heating assistance programs? Do utilities provide cooling assistance? I can answer that in terms of Operation Fuel.

We require income statements and copy of the utility bill. In terms of cooling assistance, our program runs two seasons, summer, fall, which start in July and end in October or November, depending on the conditions. And then we start over again in
December through the end of May.

We do sometimes try to extend our program season if we can. Again, based on the conditions, which include our funding resources, outside temperature and frequency of applications.

If we don’t see a slowdown, then we do our best to stay open a lot longer.

So our program offers assistance with all home energy sources, which include electric and gas utilities and all fuel sources as well as water utility assistance.

So the electric assistance is part of that cooling support, but I don’t know the schedule or all of the guidelines regarding the state’s energy assistance program.

I wouldn’t wanna answer on that on their behalf and get any information wrong.

"Do we have a sense of how much waste in medications, food, et cetera occurred with this group and the corresponding estimate of money lost?"

Did they express any indication of how significant the loss of medications, especially insulin was.

or such as did they stop taking insulin because it was not available or was wasted?”
That is a great question.
I'll take a first stab at it.
So, the focus groups that I participated in did not have experience with anxieties around losing medicine,
but they did have a lot of anxiety around losing their food,
especially with COVID, especially in the beginning period of COVID, where people were really stocking up on food and really filling their fridge with as much food as they could.
So they could minimize their trips to the grocery store to hopefully support their own health. But because of that, they were really worried about potential power outages in the summer.
And that they had just stocked their fridge full of foods that they could minimize going to the grocery store, but what if their power went out and they lost all of that food that was in their fridge.
And that would've been a significant negative financial impact for them because they had really spent a lot of money on that food and were counting on having that food to eat. And so that would've been, I assume, hundreds of dollars that they would've lost. And so, that was definitely a significant concern.
I didn’t hear anything about insulin, but I don’t know if any of my teammates have anything to add. 

I will quickly just add one thing. This is not related to medication or insulin. It’s more so related to food.

In my focus groups, it was something I remember one of my participants talking about was not attaching a specific dollar amount to how much was lost during something like a shutoff or a power outage, but more so that they have like a set budget of how much they spend, like per week or per month on things like groceries, food, etc. And when something like this happens, when their electricity goes off, and the refrigerator stops working, that week’s budget of food is gone. And it’s like, you can’t come up with, you have to dig into the next week’s budget, which is a huge and significant loss. So that’s kind of what some of the answers in my focus groups were about.

Yeah, and I guess speaking to the medical side, I don’t think any of our participants mentioned insulin in particular, but I think at least one mentioned medical devices that require electricity.
that participants or their neighbors need to, I mean, basically stay alive. And so, there was a lot of concern around that, but I guess that was mostly geared towards storm outages rather than shutoffs. Okay, another question. "Did participants have recommendations on what a better process or method might be for sharing sensitive or uncomfortable information that is required by utilities for program eligibility. With the example of the respondent that was uncomfortable with the income documentation of roommates? the income documentation of roommates? So how can motivated renters, landlords or third party support or outreach services handle this situation?" So as far as I remember, there were no particular recommendations on what a better process might be, other than reducing intrusive questioning wherever possible. One participant said that when dealing with public money organizations should have to adhere to certain guidelines and provide specific information to disperse public dollars. And participants generally understand that they have to provide financial information,
but maintaining respect for the people who need assistance is key. So yeah, if anyone wants to tackle the second part where renters and landlords can handle this situation.

I'll just jump in quickly to add to what you were saying as well. And I think a lot of the participants’ reactions to invasive questioning was also centered around lack of follow up after having such a personal experience. Sharing that information too and feeling like after providing such intimate details, also feeling like their application potentially fell through the cracks and they had to add extra effort in order to receive assistance. And so I think that added to the discomfort with feeling like the questioning was invasive. And I’d like to add that. I think that one of the answers to a better process of enrollment is data-sharing agreements between the utility companies and community-based organizations. Like what I would like to do is not even have people apply. If that person is on a fixed income over a certain age, we would just get a list of the most vulnerable
from the utility companies.
Those with balances on their accounts, and that we would just then send the utility companies a check on behalf of those customers and that we would just do this annually so that anyone who struggles with this year after year after year, again, on a fixed income where their income will not change,
that we just automatically provide a payment on those customers’ behalf. And then we can kind of think about ways to support folks who are in that second tier, who may be employed, but still are on incomes that do not line up with the cost of living in the state. There’s gotta be a way in which we can kind of auto-enroll those folks too,
but it really does boil down to having these data-sharing agreements between utility companies and community organizations. Great, another question.
"Was it ever brought up how tenants don’t have access to control the energy they pay for,
because landlord’s lock basements where fuse boxes may be?”
Sorry, I don’t mean to keep talking.
but I do have an answer for this one that I'll be quick. So in one of my focus groups, there was one person in particular who was talking about how she lives in a rental unit. And she pays for all of her utilities. None of her utilities are included in the rent, but her landlord doesn’t let her like change anything about like the temperature control of the unit, access to changing the heat settings are not available to her. It’s locked away. I don’t know if that was in the basement or not, but this was definitely brought up. And I mean, quite frankly, like it’s terrible, it’s disgusting. And so it definitely came up. And at Operation Fuel, we often hear from our fuel banks and even some customers from our fuel banks and even some customers who are applying independently through our portal, that there is a complicated relationship between their landlord and their utility bill. And that the landlord has the bill in their name. So we do work around those issues so that we can continue to provide the support and not deny a person assistance when those situations arise.
But I think that that’s another piece that we all need to think about is not everyone’s situation is so cut and dry that they can just come into your office and provide you with all the documents that you require and then get the assistance. And in some cases they’re not even guaranteed assistance if they have all of their paperwork in order. So, there’s gotta be a better way in which we remove these barriers. Perhaps we can use census data block information to do that. I think that as we, for me, feel like we’re nearly into 2023. So that’s just how rapidly things are moving. It just seems really outdated that we are still requiring people to make an appointment to apply for assistance. I just don’t understand why we’re still in that system of us assisting people. There’s gotta be a more efficient way to do this. Thank you, Brenda. And I will add one more thing. My sense is that housing feels like the most important need. And so then if there’s this tension...
between the renter and a landlord, I think the renters often feel like they don’t wanna report the landlord or create tension between them around the heating because they want to make sure that they keep their housing. And so, I think that really points to the importance of ensuring basic needs of providing affordable housing that is quality housing and that the energy assistance can be a part of that. But these essential needs are really important first.

Do the utilities know who is struggling and why can’t they give that info?” The utility companies do have a list of their hardship customers. And they will not share that info because they do not have data-sharing agreements with, well, I’ll just speak for Operation Fuel. They do not have one with us. We are actively working with them on, hopefully having something sorted out with them soon, hopefully by July. I believe that, we have a pretty solid reputation as an organization in that.
I believe that we can be trusted with that customer info.
And again, it would save us a lot of admin time
if they just sent us a list of those customers and we just mailed them back that check.
And then they can just code those customers protected for that month or someone noted earlier
or recommended earlier in your group, in your focus group,
that the winter protection programs start sooner,
which is a solution.
But there’s also, I think, a new situation that we’re running into now
that is unfamiliar to Connecticut
and that’s summer protection.
As we continue to see our temperatures rise in the summer,
heat waves are becoming more frequent.
I think the greater threat to a lack of electricity,
access to hot water is in the summer.
That is where people who have vulnerable issues
or underlying issues are at most threat
is in the summer compared to winter.
I know that there’s this, we all grew up believing
that people freeze to death without heat.
I can’t recall in my lifetime ever hearing about,
my lifetime at Operation Fuel that is,
ever hearing about anyone freezing to death. I believe that winter-related deaths are more connected to people slipping and falling, having heart attacks during snow removal and things like that. Car accidents.

I can’t recall any a time where people were freezing to death. So I think that we should consider a policy around a moratorium when a heat wave is approaching. And some states do have that, Phoenix in particular.

There’s another question for you, Brenda.

"Will the utility companies match any payments received that is not from the energy program?" So yes, the utility companies do have arrearage forgiveness programs that their customers can enroll in.

Gannon, I’ll put you on a spot, as I know that you can answer that question better than I can in terms of what protections are in place and what programs folks can enroll in. Yeah, and I think there’s, it’s kinda a complicated question based on the time of the year, ’cause we just came out of the winter protection period.
that ends on May 1st. So we’ve been seeing, I know our programs team has been seeing an increase in applications from folks because they’ve had protection. But sometimes when you’re protected from shutoff, your bill is continuing to accrue. So, during the protection period, there’s a matching payment program people can enroll in. And then there’s also a new, there’s a new start that Eversource has. But I would encourage folks, the people who can really explain this are gonna be your utility company. And I would encourage folks to contact their utilities if they’re looking for the best fit for them. ’Cause there are a few different payment plans and they kinda change based on what PURA approves in that year. <v ->Great.</v> I think that’s all the time we have now. We would like to thank CT network for broadcasting today and the recording of this will be on their website. And just a reminder to fill out this survey that Sarah sent in the chat. And thank you so much for joining us. We really appreciate your time.