HARCATUS Tri-County C.A.O., Inc.
Family Support Center

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TO: Governor Kasich & our esteemed elected officials

Thank you for your time. I know you all must be exhausted after hearing so many impassioned pleas respectfully requesting your support for their opinions. If I could bend your ear just one more time:

I have worked for HARCATUS Tri-County Community Action Organization or other non-profits since 1977. I know all about HEAP and PIPP and the changes that have occurred over the past 30 years. In 1983 I was one of about 7 individuals that worked to create the original Percent of Income Payment Plan so that our clients would have a fighting chance to keep their regulated utilities on during the harsh winters (and springs) we experience in Ohio. I know what I am talking about when I tell you that seniors on fixed incomes, the low income clients we help with their home heating bills, and the hundreds of callers who do not qualify for our services will be lost without the advocates they have at our Ohio Consumers' Counsel.

I have been a partner with the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) for about 20 years in an effort to educate people in Harrison, Carroll and Tuscarawas Counties on how to conserve energy and seek out user-friendly information in areas that are not within our expertise. I was very reluctant to make a referral to OCC in the early years – it was much too unpredictable with call center employees that just didn't have the experience and knowledge necessary to be truly good advocates. I had friends at the PUCO, with Ashley Brown

It is simply incomprehensible that the OCC budget would be reduced when the dollars funding this agency come exclusively from utility assessments and will have no bearing whatsoever on reducing the burden on Ohio tax payers. I have personal experience with the wrath of angry utility lobbyists who will stop at nothing to undercut those who are passionate about defending the people who are at the mercy of the all-powerful & mighty giants at the end of that power cord or gas pipeline. In the early 1980's, what was formerly known as Ohio Power saw fit to send a team of 3 or 4 lawyers to tiny little Dennison Ohio because I was conducting a statewide research survey of other Community Action Organizations that documented the need for a standardized low income payment plan based on income. They thought I should be disciplined by my supervisor and the agency Executive Director because I was overstepping my boundaries – too aggressive for their tastes.

In 1996 I left HARCATUS in search of new challenges, only to watch PIPP deteriorate as each regulated utility company in Ohio successfully lobbied to shape PIPP into their own individualized version. Just one short year ago there was such a plethora of PIPP plan deviations that even the more experienced

Home Energy Assistance Program Intake Worker, PUCO/OCC/Utility Company Customer Service Representative was hard pressed to adequately explain them to your average college educated low income client. Elderly, frail, mentally challenged, economically challenged and under-employed people were very cold and without necessities such as medicine, decent food and other more frivolous things like basic television or telephone service because they just couldn't stay on a payment plan they couldn't understand that, adding insult to injury, accrued huge arrearages they had no way of ever paying off.

Enter once again, The Ohio Consumers' Counsel. Charging ahead like the cavalry in an old John Wayne movie, the OCC rounded up partners from the Ohio Department of Development, Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy, Community Action Organizations, utility companies and private interest groups to begin a dialog that resulted in the brand new, totally reinvented Percent of Income Payment Plan Plus. It wasn't always easy and it certainly wasn't a no-brainer, but the OCC led the charge. We couldn't have done it without them and I appreciate the fact that this wasn't their only focus by a long shot. Issues such as telephone deregulation, the Columbia Gas Transmission Corporation's refunds that needed constant monitoring, more than $20 million in refunds to residential customers of Cincinnati Bell Telephone and Columbus & Southern Ohio Electric Co., and millions and billions of benefits too numerous to mention at this time.

At a time when our technology is growing at a pace much faster than the average utility customer can keep up with, having an unduplicated advocate in proceeding before the PUCO and other regulatory agencies, having a readily available toll-free hot line that helps many thousands of customers every year, and having the OCC in your corner over billing disputes, and knowing where to call for readily available, helpful information about utility issues is not a luxury, it is a basic human right.

Thank You.

Michele Lucas

Michele Lucas, Community Services Director