

Members of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, staff members and guests of the Committee.

August 3, 2012

My name is Jim Coutts and I live in Swanton Vermont. I welcome the opportunity to testify to the impact that rising gas prices have on the seniors in Franklin County Vermont. I am the Executive Director of a 570 member Senior Center – Franklin County Senior Center, 75 Messenger Street, St Albans, Vermont 05488.

The Center has operated a meal site at this location for 40 years and is one of the longest running programs in the State. We currently deliver 17,000 meals to home-bound seniors through nutrition programs funded by the Older American Act. We deliver meals five days a week to an average of 70 clients a day. To accomplish the delivery we rely heavily on our members, many have been delivering for years and some are husband and wives each delivering a route on alternate days.. A typical route covers 25 miles from start to finish and many of our members drive cars averaging 12-15 miles to the gallon in city driving. This requires 2 gallons of gas per delivery or \$7.00/day. Most of our drivers are on fixed income of less than \$15,000/year as they are either a surviving spouse or a retired from a low-paying occupation.

While recent gas prices have eased a little this summer they are still above the national average and 15-20 cents higher than some other area of the Vermont. When prices reached the \$4.00 mark this spring several drivers told me that they could no longer afford the gas and we lost two drivers. \$4.00 appears to be a psychological barrier that resonates with many drivers. We experienced the same situation a few years ago when gas reached the \$4.00 mark. During the summer our drivers are not faced with high heating and electric bills, so they have a little extra money for gas and can afford to volunteer. I am concerned that if estimates of higher gas prices this fall and winter come true we will face a critical shortage of drivers. Past history with volunteer drivers is that if they don't deliver meals they will find some other volunteer position and we will not get them to return.

One contingency plan would be to cut deliveries to three days/week and add cold meals for the alternate days. While this seems plausible it eliminates one essential component of the Meals on Wheels program - The Safety Check. For many of our home-bound the only person they see daily is the meals on wheels driver. A bond delivers between the drivers and the clients and our drivers are trained to assess the status of the client and to report any abnormalities to the emergency contact or case worker.

Our six routes a day average 150 miles a day or 39,000 miles a year. If we were paying a mileage stipend this would amount to \$19,890/year. Mileage reimbursement is not a viable option for most programs and certainly not for Franklin County Senior Center.

On behalf of Franklin County and the numerous other Meals on Wheels providers I urge you to complete a comprehensive study of the impact of high gas prices on the health and welfare of the senior citizens of Vermont.

A week ago prices in Swanton VT were \$3.64. I drove 28 miles south and gas prices were \$2.42- 22 cents difference. I hope this hearing sheds some light on the disparity in pricing.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on a matter of extreme importance in our efforts to serve the home-bound Vermonters meals..

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