

**Mid-Year Progress Report**  
**on**  
**Project Stay Connected**  
**May 31, 2007**

- **Over the past six months, we have delivered nine trainings state-wide to 400 people.** Recent trainings have been conducted in Boston, Fall River, Quincy, Plymouth, Northampton, and Worcester.

Our audiences include front-line staff at housing search agencies, fuel assistance programs, homeless shelters, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Social Services, and the Department of Mental Health.

As noted in the discussion below, while we still deliver trainings on a regular basis, we have succeeded in building a large network of people who are familiar with the types of utility problems that arise. We are shifting more of our focus towards systemic change in the rules and policies governing relations between utility companies and their customers, using the information we now receive regularly from the field as a solid evidentiary base for our advocacy efforts.

- **On a daily basis, we continue to help individual clients with their utility problems.** We receive a steady stream of phone calls and e-mail inquiries via our list serve, not only from those we have trained but also from those who have learned of the Project through word-of-mouth. We are often successful in having service restored to a low-income household whose service was illegally terminated, within hours of getting the call.

To quote from one thank-you letter we recently received, for helping an advocate for a seriously disabled customer stop a termination:

“I had a client whose caregiver had died, [the bills were in the caregiver’s name], and the NSTAR bill had lapsed [so that a termination was imminent]. We attempted to work with NSTAR [to stop a planned termination] and explained that we were working with fuel assistance and to please give us a few more days till his disability check came in. When I called, you personally were available to talk to me and help with my client’s problem. The referral you made to the [Department of Public Utilities] Consumer Division was perfect. They kept me on the line while they worked out a compromise with NSTAR. My client has [another week] to pay off his NSTAR bill.

“I cannot thank you enough for your help. If my client had lost his electricity his medication would have gone bad. I have worked with power companies before to protect accounts of my chronically ill patients but this situation was one that I’d never seen before [because the bills were in the name of the deceased caregiver]. Without your program and your personal assistance this situation would have ended very badly.”

While few of the people we help take the time to write such detailed thank-you letters,

this case is indicative of the work we do on an almost daily basis.

- **NCLC continues to play a key role in implementation of the “Arrearage Management Programs” (“AMPs”) that allow customers to make affordable payments on the bills, with the companies agreeing to write off some or all of the arrearages if the customer keeps up with the affordable payments established.** We have now had several months of experience with the AMPs. Both the utility companies and low-income advocates are reasonably pleased with the results to date. AMPs are not a panacea for every client, but they can be a very valuable and successful tool for working poor families who can afford to pay something every month towards their energy bill, even if they cannot afford to completely pay off an arrearage on their own. Over the next few months, we will be working to establish more consistent practices among the several AMP variations that the companies offered as pilots in the first year, and to identify “best practices” that would improve those programs.
- **In the past few weeks, NCLC has been working very closely with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and Department of Public Utilities (DPU) in the expectation that these two agencies, working with the Governor’s office, will seek an emergency, supplemental appropriation for fuel assistance.** We have been providing these agencies with information on the number of people who are in arrears and facing termination of their utility service now that the moratorium has ended. We are helping to design an emergency fuel assistance program in case the supplemental appropriation is passed.
- **We have completely revised our detailed training manual, “Utilities Advocacy for Low-Income Households,” and will soon send the revised edition to the printer.** The revised edition exactly tracks the sequence and format of the in-person trainings we deliver, which will make the material in the book even more accessible to trainees. We’ve also updated some of the out-of-date info, and added more of the actual forms and regulations people need to help their clients. We expect to print approximately 2,000 copies, which we distribute free to all trainees and to others who request a copy.
- **We recently met with key DHCD housing staff to move forward with automatic enrollment of DHCD subsidized housing recipients onto the discount rates.** Our initial goal is to match DHCD’s Section 8/voucher portfolio of 18,000 households against utility residential files, to automatically enroll as many of these voucher households onto the discount rates as possible. Meanwhile, automatic enrollment between DTA and the utility companies is ongoing, every quarter. As of late 2006, 62,000 households had been added to the discount rates through this DTA-utility company match.
- **Our “Massachusetts Utility Network” e-mail list continues to connect Project Stay Connected with several hundred subscribers, and helps low-income clients keep their utilities on.** The list serve has been particularly useful lately in identifying patterns of illegal or improper conduct by utility companies regarding payment plans, thus allowing Project Stay Connected to address those problems systematically (see next

bullet for specific examples of solutions we have achieved).

- **At the request of NCLC, the DPU's Consumer Division recently wrote a letter to all electric and gas companies in the state, reminding the companies of certain rules and policies which were not being strictly adhered to.**

First, the Consumer Division clarified that companies cannot require applicants for new utility service to produce Social Security Numbers. (This was becoming a problem for many applicants for service with Hispanic surnames.)

Second, the Consumer Division made it clear to companies that they cannot require a seriously ill customer to wait until the company sends the customer's doctor a form to complete, before the customer can assert protection under the serious illness rule. Rather, customers can immediately assert that protection by having the doctor telephone the company or by mailing (or faxing) in a letter that doctor can draft himself or herself. (This addressed delays we were seeing in customers being able to assert serious illness protection to stop a termination.)

Third, the Consumer Division clarified that companies must accept 25% of an overdue bill as a sufficient payment to stop a termination. (We were responding to numerous reports of companies demanding 50%, 75% or more of the overdue bill to stop a termination, despite clear law to the contrary.)