

South, Wheeler immediately placed the hearing in the human arena rather than allowing the proceedings to focus on technical and legal arguments.

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Dr. Raymond Wheeler

"Already in North Carolina we have thousands of poor people who are physically weak because of inadequate diets," said Wheeler. "In order to pay their

utility bills these people will have to further reduce the quality and quantity of the food they eat. In turn, this will lead to sickness and absenteeism at work and school. Unfortunately, the only alternative for many is not to pay their utility bills and thus face the possibility of freezing to death in their own homes."

Two LSNK clients testified to the special utility problems elderly people face, confirming Dr. Wheeler's findings.

"My husband is 79 and I'm 76," Cora Harris of Raleigh told the Commission. "I get a VA check for \$75 and my \$57 Social Security and a little check (from SSI) for \$28. I have bad arthritis and high

At the End of the Day ... Cold

by Kay Reibold

There's a little house that borders a tobacco field a few miles outside Fuquay-Varina, N.C. A rusty bucket hangs from the hickory tree which bends near the roof. It's Charlie's basketball hoop.

Smoke floats from the chimney and drifts in the cold night air. The light of the moon on the tin roof is sharp and silver.

In the house, the children of Doritha Covington are dreaming of what it would be like not to be cold. Vivien and Jennifer, Levirnis and Paulette, Charlie and David and Elizabeth all sleep in one room. It's the only way to stay warm.

Moonlight shines through the house. It creeps in the gaping holes around the windows and slips through the wide cracks in the walls. Moonlight steals into each opening and each corner, and with it, the cold. Cold that pushes through the rotting floor boards. Cold that fills the house with chill and dampness and misery.

When morning comes, a metal tub of water sits before the electric oven so the children can bathe. Water is carried in pails from a nearby pond or the landowners' house. There is no well. There is no outhouse.

The family's heat comes from the electric oven and a crumbling fireplace. A single light bulb dangles from the ceiling.

Two years ago, a representative from Carolina Power and Light of Fuquay Varina visited Mrs. Covington and her children to inform her that her electricity was about to be terminated for a past due bill.

"I explained that I would pay as soon as I
Kay Reibold is a supervisor for Wake Opportunities and a free-lance scriptwriter.

could," Mrs. Covington recalls. "I asked that they think about my children. I told them my food would spoil. I have to be able to cook."

Mrs. Covington had not been able to pay her bill for two months. "I asked him if I could pay a little at a time," she remembers. "But he told me, 'No, the full amount has to be paid now.'" If she didn't find the money, CP&L would automatically cut her off.

Mrs. Covington then borrowed the needed amount from the landowners, the people who allow her family to stay in the little house in exchange for work in their tobacco fields.

"I been workin' in tobacco ever since I been married," Mrs. Covington says. She grew up in Gibson, N.C., where her mother did field work and her father worked at the Southern Cotton Oil Mill.

"I like it here because I can raise my own food in the country. I'd rather raise something that belongs to me. I guess I just love to live in the country."

But country life holds little joy for Mrs. Covington and her children in the winter months.

"The cold's like slow torture," she says. "It's just with us all the time and I'm always afraid the children will get sick."

The house is so dilapidated that both the oven and the heat from the small fireplace do little to warm the four rooms. The walls are rotting. Cardboard and fabric patch the windows. There is no glass in the window-frames. There are no rugs on the floor.

Once bills are paid for the phone, insurance, lights, clothing for the children and laundry supplies, there is little money remaining for

blood pressure. He has arthritis. In the winter, we have to be kept very warm. When we get cold, we ache a lot."

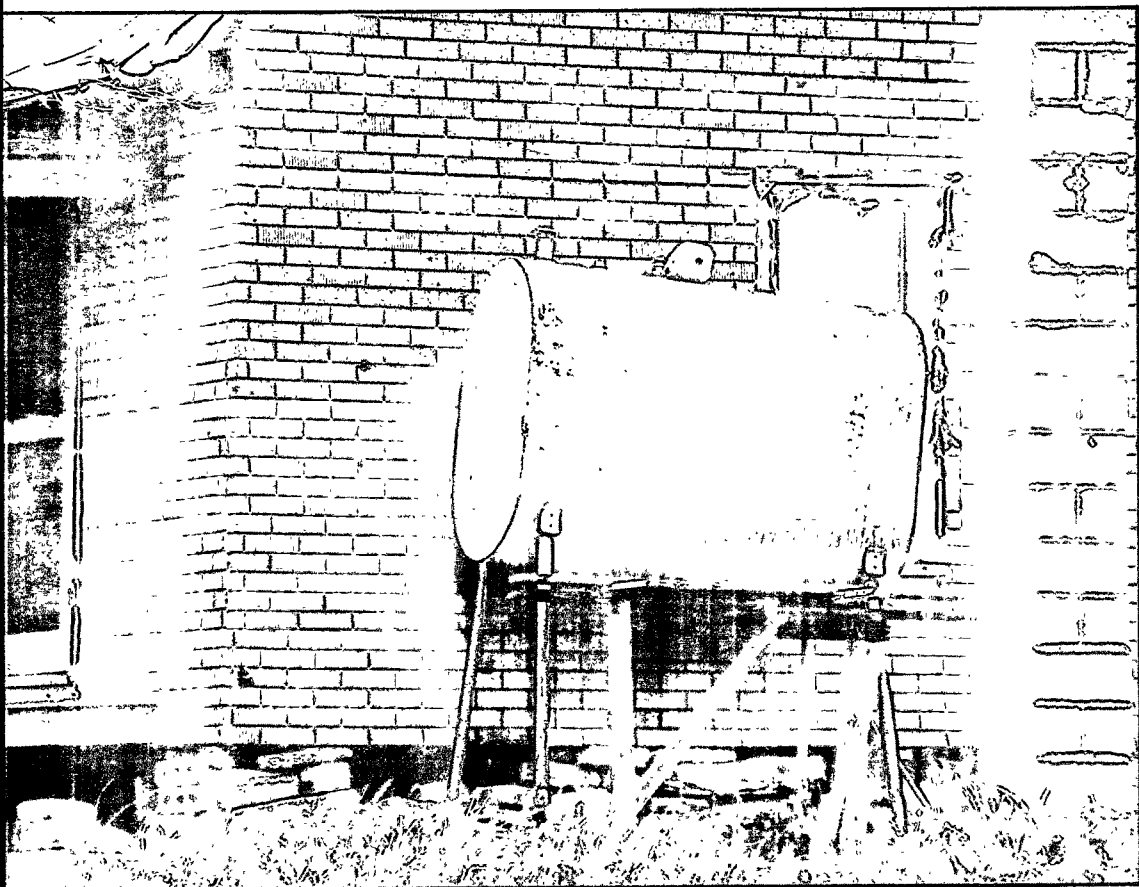
Daisey Brown, another client over 70, explained why the elderly are particularly vulnerable. "If I don't keep warm, I gets stiffer." Then Ms. Brown looked at the commissioners in the eye. "I don't think there should be any shut off in cold weather because I know how I suffer."

The gas bill alone in the Harris and Brown homes will average \$50 a month this winter. Without adequate heat, the elderly are susceptible to complications in existing medical problems as well as exposure to hypothermia, a condition where the body

temperature drops to 95 degrees or less. W. Moulton Avery, Director of the Carolina Wilderness Institute, explained to the Commission that 25,000 Americans die every year from hypothermia.

"If I don't keep warm, I gets stiffer."
Daisey Brown, age 71

Kay Reibold, who has administered Wake County Opportunity's energy emergency assistance for the past several years, followed Ms. Brown to the witness table.



firewood or any materials to patch the house.

Mrs. Covington receives a monthly AFDC check of \$277.00. She also receives food stamps. To Mrs. Covington and her children, like so many other low-income families struggling to meet basic needs during winter months, electricity and fuel are of critical concern.

On Sunday morning each of the children stands in the bright December sunlight, huddled in coats. They look out across the dirt yard. The sunlight is warm. But Mrs. Covington sighs to herself as she watches smoke curl from the chimney. It won't be long before the day will end and bring with it the cold.