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### Rethink Dangerous Utility Shutoffs

Helen Ubiñas

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On any given day, you can see busloads of giddy schoolchildren tour the state's Capitol and adjoining Legislative Office Building.

But after talking to an attorney for the Center for Children's Advocacy's Medical/Legal Partnership Project last week, I wondered if it was the legislators inside those buildings who might actually benefit from field trips of their own — preferably outside those hallowed halls.

During a February hearing to discuss a bill that would prevent turning utilities off in households with children younger than 2, attorney Bonnie Roswig recalled some skeptical legislators wondering if this was just another way for people to get out of paying their bills. (Actually, it's not — even those who seek assistance are responsible for their overdue bills.)

But mostly, Roswig said when we met at her office inside the Connecticut Children's Medical Center, she was struck by the disbelief opponents of the bill expressed at the dangerous alternatives people resort to when their power is shut off.

Boiling water to take baths? Using candles for light? The stove for heat?

Aren't there safeguards in place to protect against such extremes? some wondered.

There are some. Existing legislation prohibits cutting utilities off between Nov. 1 and May 1 for low income families and individuals with life-threatening conditions who seek the assistance and prove a need.

But there is a huge health risk gap for children, who need this protection most of all.

A 2008 pediatric study found that very young children who live in households without heat and hot water have higher rates of medical and nutritional issues, including respiratory illness and developmental delays.

Ironically, moments after she left the hearing where she presented this data, Roswig picked up this voice mail: A young girl had just been brought into the medical center with severe burns. Her grandmother had boiled water for a bath, but before she could cool it off, the little girl stepped into the scalding water.

Heartbreaking, but just one of the many stories Roswig and medical assistant Jessica White shared.

Just the other day, White said, a mother came into the medical center in a panic. Her utilities had been

shut off and she feared the food she'd bought with the last of her already limited income would go bad.

There's a name for this: It's called the "heat or eat phenomenon," where families, particularly in a recession when income is down but utility costs are not, have to make difficult decisions about what to use their limited incomes on.

When the utility termination bill (HB- 5216) was first proposed, Roswig and others hoped for year-round protection for all families with children under 2. But as the bill wound its way through the legislature, it was cut back to families experiencing verifiable economic hardship with children under 2, and only from Oct. 1 to June 1.

Considering how many programs are getting underfunded or not funded at all, that's not a bad compromise: It protects young children and gives two more months of protection than existing legislation.

But I still suggest legislators take a field trip to the Connecticut Children's Medical Center. Roswig and White are terrific tour guides, and we can all use a reminder of why struggling families, and children especially, can use all the help they can get.

**Helen Ubiñas' column appears on Thursdays and Sundays. Read her blog at [courant.com/helen](http://courant.com/helen).**

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