

TO: Representative Alan Olson, Chair, and Members of the Interim Legislative Committee on Energy and Telecommunications

FROM: Mary Caferro WEEL (Working for Equality and Economic Liberation)

RE: Public Comment on USB Program

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on behalf of WEEL on the Universal System Benefits Program. WEEL is a grassroots organization of low-income families and supporters. We work on low-income issues and energy has become increasingly important to us.

WEEL supports a Universal Benefits Program that serves the purposes it was initially set up to serve, low-income assistance, renewable energy and conservation. Energy needs are substantial and providing a safety net to help our low-income Montanans is the right direction. With increased energy rates low-income Montanans have been accessing LIEAP and Energy Assistance at record rates. It was recently reported in the Helena Independent Record that utilization of these programs was already twice that of the entire previous year. With this type of economic condition it is imperative that we are efficient and creative in the funding mechanism of programs. It is also important to keep in mind the value of long term planning, and a comprehensive review of all factors related to energy production and use. Therefore we ask that you proceed cautiously on the issue of the USB Program.

WEEL recognizes that all of the public purposes of the USB Program are important and are interconnected. Therefore all of the areas should remain funded at current levels. You may be wondering why a low-income organization would have a position on conservation and renewables? WEEL understands that when people conserve and utilize renewables there is more affordable energy available for everyone. The energy crisis is no longer just a low-income issue and we need to do everything possible to make energy affordable and available to all Montanans.

We would encourage the committee to solicit input from the North West Advisory Council prior to making a decision on the USB reallocation. We are very concerned about Montanans struggling to pay for their energy costs. WEEL supports a thorough look at the options available regarding the USB structure, however we believe that a comprehensive plan: including the current three factors of conservation, renewables, and energy assistance is appropriate.

Thank you,

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