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Looking For A Little Help From Those Who Can Provide It

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So, I wasn't thinking nearly big enough the other day when I suggested that politicians should venture out of the Capitol to get a taste of the real world behind all that legislation they're too quick to put on the back burner.

After dropping by a utility clinic Wednesday where people waited for help to keep their power on, I realized what I should have proposed was a full-on bus tour, tentatively titled Reality Bites 2010, with stops all over our hurting state.

Or, if they wanted to be all green and save on the ever-rising gas prices, they could have stopped by St. Francis Hospital's Gengras Auditorium, where the sobering struggles of so many state residents were on full display.

The object of the clinic was specifically to help people keep their power on, though volunteers also were on hand to help people access everything from donated food to clothing. It was organized by attorney Bonnie Roswig, senior staff attorney for the Center for Children's Advocacy's Medical/Legal Partnership Project. As I wrote earlier this week, she is pushing a bill to extend utility protection by two months to households with children under 2. As expected, opponents convinced it's just another way for freeloaders to fleece the system are fighting the bill's passage.

Not good news for families with limited or lost incomes who are choosing between eating and heating, medication and lights. Another hurdle for those just days from getting their power shut off when the winter protection program ends May 1.

I noticed the Stephens family as soon as they walked into the auditorium. Mom, Dad, two adorable young children — and the unmistakable look of drowning stress.

While grabbing a snack for his 2-year-old son, Christopher Stephens told me about the back injury that ended his steady moving job. With no benefits, the bills drained the family's savings. He tried to find another job, but his injury made getting or keeping one difficult. And in the meantime, his wife, Diane, a nurse, had to cut back her hours to care for her ailing mother. The landlord of their East Hartford home, they said, has been great. He's let them pay what they can, when they can. But he told them the other day that he'll have to find paying tenants.

"We couldn't have asked for a better landlord," they said. "But we can't ask him to carry us anymore."

As heartbreaking as their story is, they were just one family in a room full of people looking for a little help while explaining — even when they didn't have to — that they weren't looking for a handout, just a little relief until they got back on their feet, until the economy picked up. Because it's

got to pick up sometime, right?

Opponents have contacted Roswig to try, not so subtly, to block the bill. And after Sunday's column, my in-box has been flooded with similar rants:

"...what does this do to people's incentive to get a job to pay for the necessities of life for themselves and their children?" one reader wrote.

He wasn't done: "Would it not be better to remove children from the "dangers" of living in a home without basic necessities rather than rewarding those who fail to provide those necessities by giving them these things for free?"

Wow — where to begin? How about where his heart seems to be located — in his wallet. The legislature's nonpartisan Office of Fiscal Analysis estimates that the bill Roswig is pushing would cost about 8 cents extra a month per household.

Eight cents.

Sure, there are always going to be some people trying to work the system. But for every one of those there are many more like the people I met at the clinic, just looking for a little help from people lucky enough not to need it.

•*Helen Ubiñas' column appears on Thursdays and Sundays. Read her blog at courant.com/helen.*

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