

COVER STORY



Brenda De Los Santos | The Herald

U.S. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., greets Marlo Greponne, director of planning for HRA of New Britain, Monday at the agency's Arch Street office just before a round-table discussion on the services the agency offers and the economy's effect on those issues. Behind Dodd are, left to right, Rocco Tricarico, executive director of HRA, state Sen. Donald Defronzo, D-6th District, and state Rep. Tim O'Brien, D-24th District.

Dodd hears from working poor

Pledges support for heating assistance during visit to HRA of New Britain

By **SCOTT WHIPPLE**
HERALD STAFF

NEW BRITAIN — For years Richard Ahern labored to put food on his family's table and a roof over their heads. Then, three years ago he was injured and went on Social Security disability. Unable to pay his heating bills, he turned to the Human Resources Agency of New Britain for help.

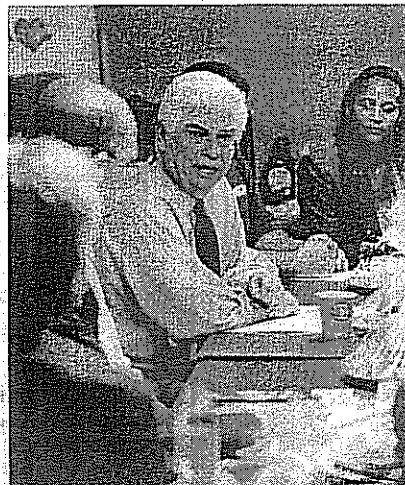
"I found people here wanting to help me, to keep my family in our home," he said. "If it hadn't been for HRA, we'd be on the streets."

Ahern's story was one of several Democrat Chris Dodd, senior senator from Connecticut, heard from HRA cli-

ents Monday at the agency's Arch Street office. Agency executive director Rocco Tricarico invited Dodd to hear firsthand how the organization was making an impact on the community.

Tricarico and Marlo Greponne, HRA's director of planning and programs, talked about the agency's 30 programs and ways they have made a difference in the lives of 16,000 city residents. But it was clients like Alex Molina, out of work with a back injury, his family huddled together in one room around an electric heater, whose story illustrated the agency's message of one-stop assistance.

Dodd promised that when he returned to Washington energy assistance would be "on the front burner." Characterizing



the current economic crisis as "the worst since 1932," he said he was committed to keeping families from "falling through the

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Dodd says he'll help

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social cracks. The job will be challenging but we can do this."

The senator vowed to step up his efforts to slow down the rate of home foreclosures (according to HRA, now at 1,000 a month in Connecticut) and to crack down on predatory lenders.

Tricarico pointed out that paying late on a heating bill can have a rippling effect. A delinquent payment to an oil company can lead to a poor credit rating, making it difficult for the person to rent an apartment or land a job.

Paul Catanzaro, president of HRA's board of directors, told Dodd another difficulty is convincing clients, many of them elderly, that it's OK to accept help.

"Because of pride, some seniors would rather skip a meal than accept food stamps," he said.

One by one, state Sen. Don DeFronzo and state Reps. John

Geragosian, Tim O'Brien and Peter Tercyak painted a word picture for Dodd, a portrait of a new class of voter prevalent in New Britain: "The working poor." These are hard-working families, grappling with the higher cost of living while their wages have remained the same.

"If Congress votes for another stimulus package, please don't be timid this time around," DeFronzo said to Dodd. "We need an innovative approach. City residents are paying property taxes on homes that are now worth less than their mortgages; many [homeowners] are either earning less than they were when they bought their homes or they're not working at all."

Dodd told DeFronzo he has urged the Obama election team to keep in mind that the new administration begins Nov. 5.

"We can't wait until the inauguration in January," Dodd said. "People need to know early on that we care and that we're already doing something."

In answer to a question from The Herald about releasing his own home mortgage information,

Dodd said, "No one wants the bipartisan ethics committee to complete their work more than I do. That's what I'm waiting for. Let them complete their work first."

Earlier in the year, Dodd, chairman of the Senate banking, housing and urban affairs committee, praised Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac "for riding to the rescue to help people get home mortgage loans."

He is also on record as saying they "need to do more to help high-risk borrowers obtain more favorable loans."

The ranking Democrat on the foreign relations committee said he has yet to make up his mind about Senate committees should Obama be elected.

"I'll probably stick with banking," Dodd said, and added, "I'm also concerned about my friend and colleague from Massachusetts [Sen. Ted Kennedy who is battling cancer]. I sit next to him on the labor and education committee; I'm there to help him. We've got some big issues on health care to grapple with."