

Weatherization works

Alabama's Weatherization Assistance Program gets big boost from economic stimulus package

As part of President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (economic stimulus bill), state energy offices and weatherization assistance programs throughout the nation will see increased dollars coming their way for home weatherization efforts. Weatherization reduces energy costs for low-income families by improving the energy efficiency of their homes. The assistance is free to qualifying homeowners.

That's good news for potentially hundreds of low-income families in Sylacauga. The program will see its funds greatly increased due to the expanded emphasis from the stimulus bill, which includes \$5 billion for the Weatherization Assistance Program. The emphasis of this plan – to make 2.5 million low-to-moderate income homes across the nation more energy efficient.

Alabama's share is more than \$127 million. The funding includes \$71.8 million in home weatherization funding for low-income families in Alabama and \$55.5 million for the state energy program.

Under the stimulus bill, the amount that can be spent on each home increased from \$2,500 to \$6,500, to allow more comprehensive energy-efficiency measures to be implemented. The program is available for families making up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level or about \$44,000 a year for a family of four.

How does the program work? The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) partners with state-level agencies, such as the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), to implement the Weatherization Assistance Program. DOE awards grants to state energy agencies, like ADECA. ADECA then partners with 15 local agencies, like Community Action Agency of Talladega County, to deliver energy-efficiency services to low-income households.

According to ADECA, Alabama's Weatherization Assistance Program has weatherized over 5 million homes in Alabama for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and families with children since 1976.

By promoting energy efficiency and weatherization programs to insulate homes and save money, families can permanently cut their energy bills while putting thousands of foot soldiers to work ensuring that the insulation and reparation gets underway.

The federally-funded program uses skilled technicians to conduct energy audits to determine which energy efficiency measures are most appropriate and cost-effective for each home. Typically, measures include installing attic and wall insulation, reducing air infiltration, performing tune-ups and repairs to heating and cooling systems, repairing ductwork, replacing appliances to improve efficiency and safety, and replacing the incandescent lighting with compact fluorescent bulbs.

Weatherization personnel also address energy-related health and safety conditions, particularly carbon monoxide and combustion safety. All combustible gas equipment and gas lines are checked for leaks and infrared cameras are used to detect water intrusion.

By cutting the energy bills of low-income families instead of offering aid, weatherization reduces dependency and liberates these funds for spending on more pressing family issues, says the U.S. Department of Energy, noting that residential customers consume about a fifth of the nation's electricity supply.

Cutting that demand would make a big difference. On average, in Alabama, weatherization reduces heating bills by 32 percent and overall energy expenses by \$413 per year at current prices. The spending spurs low-income communities

toward job growth and economic development. Weatherization returns \$1.30 in energy-related benefits for every \$1 invested in the program, according to ADECA.

Want to know if you qualify for the Weatherization Assistance Program? Contact the Community Action Agency of Talladega County at 136 North Court Street, Talladega, AL 35161, (256) 362-8147, or in Sylacauga at 201 West 4th street, Sylacauga, AL 35150, (256) 245-2056, which administers Alabama's Weatherization Assistance Program for more information.