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Alaska weatherization effort brings home warmth, savings

Jennifer Gibbins | The Cordova Times | Feb 15, 2011

With a goal of reducing energy costs and bringing homes up to safe, healthy and energy efficient standards, 14 homes in Cordova have recently received weatherization services through the [Alaska Weatherization Program](#).

"This program is wonderful. I could not have afforded to hire anyone to come and do this work on my home," said Gloria Clark. "Now I can stand at the sink and do my dishes and the wind isn't blowing right off the lake and into the house."

Like other participants in the program, Clark's home underwent three assessments prior to weatherization. First, a simple written application examined annual energy usage, square footage and other basic information to determine eligibility. Following that, an onsite inspection was conducted by an energy specialist with the Alaska Community Development Corp. (AKCDC), as well as a diagnostic Blower-Door test that uses specialized software to model home energy use. The AKCDC energy specialist created a customized weatherization plan for the house that was later implemented by a professional contractor team from Alaska SafeTech Industries, including targeting diagnostic goals based on weatherization,.

The plan for Clark's home included caulking leaks throughout the home, plugging holes in the skirting, three new windows, a new Toyo stove, a fan in the bathroom and new smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. The contractor team repeated diagnostic testing prior to commencing work and upon completion, measured results against the targeted goals for each home. The level of investment varies from home to home depending on a number of factors, however, it can be as much as \$8,500.

Weatherization program created in 1976

The Weatherization Assistance Program was created under Title IV of the Energy Conservation and Production Act of 1976. During a period of staggering increases in energy prices following the 1973 oil crisis, the program was designed to save imported oil and cut heating bills for low-income households, including senior citizens living on fixed incomes and Social Security, who were especially hard hit by rising energy bills.

Early emphasis was on low-cost measures such as covering windows with plastic sheeting and caulking and weather stripping windows and doors. Gradually over time the program became more comprehensive, addressing heating and cooling systems and other mechanical equipment. In the 1990s advanced home energy audits were adopted allowing more customized analysis of every home prior to weatherization with a goal of the most cost-effective treatment and results.

Until recently, funding for the Alaska program hovered around \$4 million to \$10 million annually. Weatherization programs were structured as grants to homes with an income cap of under \$20,000, or for homes with higher incomes as a home-owner reimbursement program for improvements up to \$10,000.

"The rebate program structure works for some people, but for others it can mean that the job never gets done or does not get finished," said Ron Waldron, president of Alaska SafeTech Industries. "Some home owners are spending \$15,000-\$20,000 in order to do the work and get the \$10,000 rebate. There are a lot of people who just don't have the expertise or that kind of money."

Alaska boosts weatherization budget by \$200 million

In 2008, the State of Alaska determined to pump \$200 million into weatherization over five years through a capital budget investment. The program was expanded to include fully funded weatherization assistance and qualifying income caps were raised significantly. This commitment

meant not only could far more homes be treated, but that more meaningful improvements could be made.

Additionally, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (the Recovery Act), the federal Weatherization Assistance Program received \$5 billion to weatherize nearly 600,000 homes and a number of amendments were enacted to allow more cost-effective measures to be installed in more homes, including raising the maximum dollar limit per dwelling.

"Prior to 2008 we were working on approximately 150 homes annually," said Patrick Shiflea, executive director of the Alaska Community Development Corp. "The work was going well, but our test results showed that more could be done and we were missing opportunities to have a real impact on energy usage and savings."

"We were able to demonstrate to agencies that we were able to project what type of savings we could achieve, and since we were already going to the homes, it was cost effective to go further and have a more comprehensive impact," said Shiflea.

With the funding increase, AKCDC has expanded their staff with heavy emphasis on advanced training for energy specialists and contractors and workers. The result is a highly trained network.

At Jim and Signe Fritsch's Cordova home, leaks were sealed, foam board insulation was installed under the house, insulation was blown into the ceiling and a window was replaced.

"When we applied, Signe was pregnant with our second child," said Jim Fritsch. "Under the reimbursement program we would have had to get off of work, go to Anchorage to get materials and then do the work. We are a busy young family trying to make ends meet. It just wasn't going to happen."

"[Alaska SafeTech] did a great job. They were professional and the work was done in a timely manner. We feel very fortunate to have received this."

Average annual weatherization savings of \$437

According to the federal weatherization program website, families receiving weatherization services reduced annual energy bills by an average of about \$437, depending on fuel prices. Speaking with Clark, Fritsch and others whose homes were recently worked on, it is too soon to tell how their annual energy usage will be impacted, however, there was unanimous feedback that the work was very professional and home owners said that homes were noticeably less drafty and warmer. One home owner reported an entirely new problem. Roses stored for the winter in her "cold-room" were beginning to bloom.

"Our goal is to make a difference with the state's money, to make sure that the changes are done right, and that we keep the heat in," said Waldron. "Even modest savings of 20 percent means that energy is saved and over time this really means something for the end user. When you multiply that times hundreds of homes, then we really start to make a difference."

The Weatherization Assistance Program is available to renters and homeowners throughout the state. A house may only be weatherized one time and eligibility is determined by the residents income and family size. Houses that were weatherized before April 2008 may be re-weatherized.

While there is currently a wait list for the program, Shiflea says that the increased investment from the state means there is plenty of funding to service homes currently on the list, and more into the future to meet the needs of new applicants. Information about the program can be found at www.alaskacdc.org or by calling 800-478-8080.

"I wrote the governor to say thank you," said Clark. "I've talked to people who were denied and said, re-apply. I encourage everyone to apply. This is just wonderful."

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