



Alabama weatherization program taking big strides with stimulus funding

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HUTNSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - With a boost from federal stimulus money, Alabama's weatherization program is off to a quick start toward its three-year goal of weatherizing more than 6,600 homes.

Repairs and upgrades to improve energy efficiency have been made to 733 Alabama houses, and state officials say the pace of completion is accelerating.

"Alabama has already exceeded 10 percent of its goal, which is well ahead of much of the nation," said Doni Ingram, director of the Alabama Department of Economic Affairs. "A recent report in the *New York Times* found that many states had yet to reach 2 percent of their goal."

Weatherization is a federally funded program, directed statewide by ADECA and administered at the regional level by 16 community action or service organizations. Congress appropriated stimulus funds to the program to support jobs in the construction industry and to help more low- and moderate-income families cut their utility bills. Specially trained contractors are hired to make structural improvements that will increase the energy efficiency of houses selected for weatherization.

According to Ingram, hundreds of contractors have now received training and reports from regional weatherization agencies indicate that the number of families receiving services is increasing each month.

"It has done a lot of good for a lot of people," said Dr. Lee Gradford, CEO of the Community Action Partnership of Huntsville, Madison and Limestone Counties. "We have provided weatherization for 74 homes and we are in the processing of finishing 29 others."

The Huntsville-based organization is one of six regional agencies that have completed more than a third of their budgeted weatherization projects.

For many years, weatherization has been a relatively small program in Alabama with an annual budget of about \$3 million or less. In the middle of last year, Alabama learned it would be awarded \$71.8 million in additional funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The state has received half of the funding, and expects to receive the other half later this year.

Stimulus funding is enabling the regional agencies to provide weatherization for a backlog of eligible recipients and to provide the service new clients. The program is designed to benefit low- and moderate-income residents, with priority given to the elderly, those with handicaps or households with small children. Eligibility standards were broadened and the scope of individual projects was expanded because of stimulus funding.

The Community Action Agency of Talladega, Clay, Randolph, Calhoun and Cleburne Counties is one of the more successful programs. It has completed nearly two-thirds of the 87 houses budgeted in its initial share of stimulus funding, but Weatherization Coordinator William Anderson said that quickly expanding the program has not been an easy task.

"We have never done anything like this before. It's been a learning process, but we have become better at it as we go along," said Anderson. "We have had to hire a lot of people to even have a shot at accomplishing what we have."

In Alabama, 3,320 houses are scheduled to be weatherized using the first half of the stimulus funds. Once the state receives the remainder of the funding, the total number of houses scheduled for improvement will be doubled to 6,640, about ten times the annual average in prior years.

Community Action Agency of Northwest Alabama (Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties), Etowah County Community Services Program, Elmore-Autauga Community Action Committee (Autauga, Chilton, Elmore and Shelby counties) and Community Action Agency of Northeast Alabama (Blount, Cherokee, DeKalb, Jackson, Marshall and St. Clair counties) are other agencies that have made substantial progress toward their initial goals. The completion rates for these regions range from 38 percent to 77 percent.

Toney Pitts, housing and weatherization coordinator for the Huntsville agency, said the stimulus program has had a very positive impact.

"It's a good program," Pitts said. "We do a lot of improvements that families couldn't afford to have done on their own, and it makes a difference. You can walk in many houses after weatherization and just feel the difference."



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