

Insulating against high bills: Residents weatherize homes to save money

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(Source: The Wilson Daily Times)By Rochelle Moore, The Wilson Daily Times, N.C.

Mar. 6--Pearlie Neal wasn't sure she needed to weatherize her home last year when she learned about a U.S. Department of Energy program available in Wilson County.

But she applied anyway. An initial inspection revealed she did need some work done on her Bruton Street, single-story brick house. Neal, 79, is retired, receives a Social Security check and hasn't had any major home improvements since 1993. The last major job was a roof replacement.

"I can really feel a difference in the house," she said. "It seems like it's a little bit warmer now. They really did some of everything that needed to be done and I'm thankful for it."

Neal is one of 30 homeowners who have had their homes weatherized as part of a federally funded program managed by the Martin Community Action agency, said Reginald Speight, executive director of the agency, which operates programs in Wilson, Nash, Edgecombe, Martin, Pitt and Beaufort counties.

Many residents have become interested in weatherizing their homes following increases in their utility bills.

Three federally funded weatherization programs are under way in Wilson County and will benefit an estimated 410 to 430 homeowners by the end of June. More homeowners will be able to tap into the program during the next funding cycle starting July 1. The programs are funded each year from July 1 to June 30.

Neal, who hasn't watched for changes in her utility bill, said her recent Wilson Energy bills have been about \$300, but she attributes that to cold weather. She noticed a lot of changes in her home, especially after it was sealed from outside air leaks.

"When the garbage truck came up, my windows vibrated, but they don't vibrate anymore," she said. "It seems like it's a little bit warmer now and I like how my shower head doesn't spew out water like it used to. They put in energy saving bulbs. They're real bright, but they don't draw a lot of energy."

What the program covers

The weatherization program includes energy saving upgrades, including the installation of fluorescent light bulbs, low-flow shower heads, a vapor barrier under the house, insulation, water heater reflector wraps, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, HVAC system checks, air leak seals, toilet water saving devices, a check for refrigerator efficiency, plumbing and duct work.

Residents are also educated on ways to save energy and reduce consumption. The program, which provides between \$3,000 and \$5,000 worth of work, is funded by the federal government for qualified residents.

The effectiveness of the U.S. Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program, which has been in existence nationwide for 33 years, is evaluated at Oak Ridge Laboratories, in Washington, D.C., Speight said.

"They can get from as minute of a detail as an individual house to savings for the state," Speight said. "Typically, what they're saying with weatherization is there is a 30 percent savings."

Laboratory workers measure a variety of variables when determining the savings, including each unit of usage, temperature fluctuations for each day and changes in service rates. Monthly bills are also reviewed for an entire year before and after weatherization, Speight said.

"No one measures the actual cost savings until that 12 months has gone by," Speight said. "They can look at a bill and do that per utility bill, per agency, per house, per state."

Assessing the changes

Cindy McIver has noticed a difference in her Fitch Street house, which she had weatherized in August. She's experienced a difference in her bills and the efficiency of her heating and air conditioning system. She applied for the program after her heating unit stopped working and she had to start using electric space heaters. In addition to weatherization, she also qualified for a separate program that paid for the replacement of her heating system.

In 2009, she used space heaters, which shot her bill up to about \$300 a month. After her unit was replaced and weatherization performed, her bill was reduced to about \$140 on average each month.

"It has helped me out compared to last year with my light bill," she said. "I haven't had a \$100 light bill like that since I moved into the house."

McIver's 1993 house is a little different than others since her heating system is fueled by natural gas and her air conditioning operates on electricity. She said she has only cared to watch the cost of her electricity on her Wilson Energy bill, which includes water, wastewater, garbage and stormwater fees. She receives natural gas from Piedmont Natural Gas and not Wilson Energy.

She also noticed an overall improvement to her house and says the energy efficiency program works for her. She said she's not experiencing high utility bills as many other Wilson Energy customers have this winter.

"It takes less heat to heat up the house," she said. "It doesn't stay on as long, but it heats up the house quickly. I am very pleased just to have a bill paid in full and I don't have to worry about how I'm going to pay for it."

The programs

The three weatherization programs offered in Wilson County are still under way and any resident can apply. Approval is based on income requirements, which are set at levels that are making it easier for middle-income residents to qualify, officials said. The Department of Energy program has traditionally benefited people with low incomes, the elderly, disabled and other residents in need.

The federal government, however, has started offering additional funding, some through stimulus dollars, and ramped up the government's ability to help more homeowners during difficult economic times.

In Wilson, three programs are offered and are only different in relation to their funding sources. The U.S. Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program earmarked \$126,000 for Wilson County and has benefited 25 residents since July 1.

A second program, funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, started in January and has benefited five homeowners so far. The program will provide \$1.46 million in weatherization upgrades to a total of 366 homes by the end of June.

A third program became available this year after the City of Wilson received \$210,000 in energy assistance from the federal government. The city gave the funding to Martin Community Action with a requirement that weatherization is completed only on homes tied to Wilson Energy. Seventeen homes are being prepared for weatherization upgrades and between 30 to 50 will benefit in the city this year.

Applying for help

Residents need to apply in Wilson at the agency's local office, which is based at Jackson Chapel, at 571 E. Nash St. Income qualifications are at either 200 percent or 250 percent of the poverty level. The 200 percent threshold is \$29,140 for a family of two and \$44,100 for a family of four. The 250 percent income qualification is attached to the city-funded program.

After approval, qualified residents will receive a home energy audit, which takes about three to four hours. Weatherization services take one full day and are performed by professionals hired and managed by Martin Community Action.

Additional federal funding is still available this year, but the agency may or may not qualify to receive more money for homes in Wilson County.

"We're not sure what the requirements are," Speight said. "We are going to apply. Whether or not we get funding, we don't know."