

WHAT ENERGY ASSISTANCE IS AVAILABLE? WHAT STATE AND FEDERAL INITIATIVES ARE BEING PROPOSED? Heidi Leighton

On July 30th, Husson College and Senator Kevin Raye hosted an energy forum here at the Boat School, with presentations from Efficiency Maine, Maine State Housing Authority, USDA Rural Development, and others. Nearly everyone agreed that while energy assistance programs are effective, they are massively under-funded. The mechanisms to help families at risk are in place but the funding to keep them working is not there.

Senator Raye provided a handout on Home Energy Savings Tips at the July 30th forum. It describes things you can do to make your home more energy efficient.

The Resource Center has prepared a handout titled “Energy Assistance Programs” that has descriptions of some of the agencies that provide energy assistance to Maine residents and businesses. The handout includes agency contact information and descriptions of the various programs.

Habib Dagher, a University of Maine professor, recently testified before Congress about energy issues. He was quoted as saying “Maine will likely be the first state to experience a heating state of emergency”. The facts speak for themselves:

- 80% of Maine families heat with oil
- 10 years ago Maine families spent 5% of their household budgets on energy needs including heat, vehicle fuel, and electricity. Today that number is close to 25%. Some experts think that if things don’t change, in ten years half of a Maine family’s monthly budget could go towards energy costs.

We learned a lot about energy in Maine at the forum sponsored by Husson College and Senator Raye.

Some general energy information

- 40% of the energy that is consumed in Maine is used in buildings.
- 8 out of 10 of Mainers heat with oil which is the highest percentage in the nation. The next highest state has 56% of their population heating with oil.

LIHEAP

- The Maine State Housing Authority has determined that \$101 million of LIHEAP funding will only provide 20-30 days of heat for Maine people this winter. They figure they need at least \$1 billion for the New England states this winter.

Weatherization & Energy Conservation

- The Washington Hancock Community Agency Weatherization program completes energy related repairs to about 120 houses per year. Their priorities are to work with the elderly, disabled, families with small children or folks at risk for hypothermia.
- If you weatherize your home you will see the payback in about three years. This means you will gain back what it costs in weatherization in savings in energy expenses.
- Fuel assistance clients can get help to replace their furnace if it dies. WHCA replaced or repaired 66 furnaces last year. They already have 45 on the waiting list for this year and haven’t opened the program yet.
- If you replace your old furnace with a new, more efficient one, you will realize a cost savings on your fuel in 3.5 years or less.

- WHCA will do an energy audit for any homeowner for \$150. They will create a list of improvements that can be made to your home to save energy.

It was strongly emphasized at the energy forum that neighbors need to help neighbors more than ever. A regional winter resource team is being formed for Washington County and everyone needs to keep an eye out to make sure their neighbors are doing ok.

Dale McCormick from the Maine State Housing Authority offered this advice for the three weatherization tasks you should do now to save energy costs this winter:

- Plug the holes in your home.
- Add some insulation.
- Change the way you live in the house. Heat the air around you.

Ms. McCormick calls weatherization a “three-fer” because it offers these benefits:

- The homeowner uses less fuel so less money leaves Maine to go to foreign oil suppliers.
- Small, locally based contractors that do the weatherization repairs or businesses that supply the materials make money.
- The family keeps more of their money, which is then spent on other goods and services and spreads throughout the area. She points out that middle income households spend about 6% of their earnings on heating but low income families spend 24% and the elderly spend 19% so saving on heating bills can translate into a great deal of discretionary spending.

Another program we learned about at the energy forum is the Maine Solar Incentive Program which is administered by Efficiency Maine and provides direct cash incentives for professionally installed solar heating or electrical systems. Unfortunately all the funding for this program for 2008 and 2009 has been allocated. It’s important for homeowners to know that the program operates on a “first come, first served” basis and you must apply before you install any solar system. The program will not reimburse costs for an already installed system. John Rice from Efficiency Maine noted that when the 2008 funding for this program was used up, there were already 85 households on the waiting list for the 2009 funding.

Representatives of the Maine congressional delegation attended the energy forum and discussed various bills and initiatives that members of the delegation are working on. Those policy initiatives are summarized in a document produced by the Resource Center titled “State and Federal Policy Initiatives”.

The policy initiatives handout also summarizes recommendations of the Maine Community Action Association and the \$12.6 million energy plan that Governor Baldacci has put forward since the energy forum sponsored by Senator Raye and Husson College.

It’s important to realize that state and federal dollars will not be spent on these problems unless elected officials hear from their constituents that they are important. The policy initiatives handout has contact information for the Congressional delegation, the Governor’s office and others.