How Town Energy Committees and local Foodbanks can help low-income Vermonters save money and energy

The Norwich Energy Committee (NEC) recently learned that Efficiency Vermont now provides high efficiency LED bulbs at no cost to low-income Vermonters through the Vermont Foodbank. Bulbs are primarily distributed to regional food shelves, but all 225 members of the Foodbank network, which also includes shelters and meal sites, can obtain bulbs for distribution to their clients. In 2014, the Foodbank program provided assistance to 153,000 Vermonters.

Unfortunately, not all food shelves know to order the bulbs and. if ordered, their usage is not promoted. The primary mission of the Foodbank program has been food provision. Therefore, when ordered, bulbs are typically placed on a shelf as one of many items available to clients, and are taken when a bulb burns out in the home.

The Norwich Energy Committee recognized that active promotion and expanded usage of these bulbs by the 153,000 low-income Vermonters accessing Food Bank resources could produce huge energy savings, as well as demonstrate to this population in a very concrete way the benefits of energy efficiency: lower electrical utility bills.

As a pilot project, we met with our local food shelf, Upper Valley Haven, described our desire to promote usage of the bulbs, and came up with a mutually acceptable plan for the promotion.

The Energy Committee produced a short information sheet which listed the energy and financial benefits of the bulbs, and encouraged their immediate replacement of incandescent and CFL bulbs, especially in high-use areas. The sheet was placed in a reusable grocery sack containing 4 LED bulbs, and the sacks were given to ALL food shelf clients until local supplies were exhausted. The Food Shelf distributed 152 bulbs in five days!

There was no interference with the usual client flow through the food shelf, and the bulbs were greatly appreciated. The food shelf plans to continue the project.

If these 10-watt LED bulbs (rated to last 25,000 hours) replaced 60-watt incandescents, and were used three hours per day, we projected that, in aggregate, they would save the food shelf clients $28,500 in electrical utility bills, save 190,000 kWh of electricity, and reduce CO2 production by 61,750 lbs!

We then contacted administrators of the Foodbank program at the state level to determine if they could support a broader effort. They were supportive, but stressed that member organizations within their program varied in size, and were primarily staffed by volunteers. Their focus has been food distribution, not promotion of energy efficiency. Foodbank members that are not food shelves, such as senior meal

sites, etc., will have had no experience ordering bulbs, and will need assistance in tapping the resource.

Hence each regional promotional effort would require adaptation to local conditions, education, and collaborative planning between the Foodbank member organization and interested Energy Committee. Larger sites might accommodate a continuous, independent program, while smaller sites might prefer intermittent promotions and/or active presence by Energy Committee volunteers.

The Vermont Foodbank website (https://www.vtfoodbank.org/) has a directory of regional Foodbank members (https://www.vtfoodbank.org/agency-locator), so local Energy Committees can identify their regional centers. The website has additional information about the Foodbank programs, and we recommend that interested Energy Committees learn about the Foodbank structure before contacting the local sites.

PDFs of the information sheets used for our promotion is posted. You can adapt them to your location. If you want to learn more about the NEC experience, contact nblevy@icloud.com.