

Expo delivers energy-saving tips, kits, a hot meal and goodwill

Minnesota Power, ComfortSystems and other companies and agencies once again invited people on low or fixed incomes to learn how they can save on utility bills and enjoy a hot meal in the process at the 2014 Energy Awareness Expo.

The Energy Expo featured information, energy-saving ideas and a complimentary energy kit that this year included two CFL light bulbs, one LED bulb, a string of LED Christmas lights, an LED night light, faucet aerators, a low-flow shower head and a furnace filter warning whistle.

In addition to Minnesota Power and ComfortSystems, other participating entities were Como Oil, the Duluth Energy Efficiency Program, Community Action Duluth and the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency. Nearly 600 energy kits were handed out, and about 1,000 meals were served.

“The customers who attend this event continue to inspire me with the questions they ask and how engaged they are,” said Amanda Oja, energy efficiency analyst with Minnesota Power’s Conservation Improvement Program. “Many attendees are facing challenges and still choose to embrace this event as an opportunity to empower themselves to learn more about energy efficiency and take an active role in using energy wisely.”

Now in its 11th year of operation, the Energy Expo has become something of a community social event as well as a folksy forum on energy savings. A long line formed to get into the Salvation Army gymnasium well before the doors were opened, brochures handed out and the steam tables loaded with chicken and vegetables. Gary Yernberg, 63, and his girlfriend, Teddy Hill, arrived at the Salvation Army about 90 minutes early.

“I think what I like the most about it is learning the many different ways you can save money,” Ms. Hill said when asked what attracted her to the annual Expo. She said she enjoyed receiving the free CFL light bulbs, as well as the social aspects of seeing friends and chatting with them at the Expo. “I just know it’s a very good program.”

Yernberg also appreciated receiving the efficient CFL and LED lights, because as a participant in the CARE program, he strives to save as much on energy as possible. CARE, a program that stands for “Customer Affordability of Residential Electricity,” offers electric bill discounts to income-qualified households. Yernberg said the CARE rate makes the long winter more affordable in terms of utility bills.

“For me, it’s \$20 a month,” he said. “I’m surprised the power company sent me a \$100 check in the mail last spring. I guess I overpaid or something.” Sitting at a table near Yernberg was Richard Ryzak, 62, who said he came to his first Energy Expo a few years ago when he heard about it while working in the kitchen at the YMCA.

“I love the energy information you get,” he said of the Expo. “The number one thing for me is to see what I can do at the house to make sure all that extra energy goes bye-bye.” At a previous Energy Expo, Ryzak said, he received a surge protector into which he always plugs his home computer. “And I’m still using the (CFL) light bulbs I got here.”





Arlene McGinnis said she had attended the Energy Expo four different times over the years. Her lifestyle has changed since her first Expo. A widow, the 79-year-old is adjusting to living alone as a tenant following the accidental death of her daughter three years ago and the departure of a grandson who once lived with her.

McGinnis said she appreciated receiving the Christmas LEDs and the low-flow showerhead and considered the Energy Expo an opportunity to get out and engage with others who are conserving energy. Yesterday's event obviously radiated goodwill for Minnesota Power -- and electricity in general -- for McGinnis, who said she once owned stock in ALLETE and regrets selling her shares.

"One thing I like about it, electricity, is it's clean," she said. "I've heated my homes with everything from coal to wood to oil and electric."