

Energy Partners Program Helps *Low-Income Customers* *Save Energy and Money*

Denny Laakkonen of the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA) visited over 400 single-family homes in 2014, offering to help Minnesota Power low-income customers conserve energy, save money and increase comfort.

"Convincing people to let me come over and spend an hour in their homes is not always easy," said Laakkonen, a designated energy analyst for Minnesota Power's Energy Partners program. "They always think there is a catch, but I really just want to share information, install energy-saving products, and help them save on their monthly electric bills."

The Energy Partners program is designed to provide income-eligible customers educational resources and energy-efficient products and services that will help them use energy more effectively for the long term. The program is delivered primarily through seven local community agencies that work on Minnesota Power's behalf to identify and reach qualified customers. Those partnering agencies are Kootasca Community Action Council, AEOA, Mahube Community Council, Bi-County Community Action Program, Lakes and Pines Community Action, Tri-County Community Action and Duluth Community Action.

"We work with organizations that specialize in weatherization and fuel assistance to deliver this program to our customers," said Amanda Oja, energy efficiency analyst, Minnesota Power. "They are already working with the population we are trying to reach and they understand the income guidelines."

Laakkonen enjoys his work. He arrives at customers' homes armed with information

about energy efficiency, resources available through Minnesota Power's Power of One® conservation program, and opportunities for low-income customers to lower their electric rates through the Customer Affordability of Residential Electricity (CARE) program.

Laakkonen walks through the house, replacing some incandescent bulbs with more energy-efficient compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) and identifying simple ways to reduce plug load and save energy. He tests refrigerators and examines electric water heaters, microwaves and dehumidifiers to determine whether customers qualify for ENERGY STAR® qualified replacements. He also presents additional energy-saving devices, such as energy-efficient floor lamps, desk lamps or smart power strips, and smaller items including shower timers, thermometers, and indoor light timers.

"People are always welcoming and thrilled to have their light bulbs replaced and to receive these products," Laakkonen said. "They realize how expensive bulbs are on the market and appreciate the help from Minnesota Power."

John Doberstein, an independent contractor with Community Action Duluth, delivers similar home energy analysis services to customers. Prior to visiting individual apartments, he gets permission from the owner or property manager to present an informational session and "meet and greet" for all residents.

"Tenants come down, hear about the program, see what kinds of lights and appliances we are talking about, and learn how the analysis process works," Doberstein said. "Through Minnesota Power's program, we provide shower timers, light emitting diode (LED) night



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Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency



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Amanda Oja,
Minnesota Power



lights, or other items to encourage people to attend and sign up for an energy analysis.”

Most of the apartment buildings he visits are old and inefficient. Many units have outdated refrigerators, purchased 20 or 30 years ago, that use much more kWh than newer models. Doberstein tests the refrigerators and offers to replace those that qualify under the Energy Partners program. He changes light bulbs, installs energy-saving products, and visits with residents one-on-one, sharing ways to conserve energy and answering questions about available programs and services.

“People are enthused to learn about energy efficiency and appreciate the opportunity to get new refrigerators,” Doberstein said. “Most importantly, tenants learn what Minnesota Power is doing with other partners in the community to reduce energy use and assist low-income customers.”

One major outreach event, co-sponsored by Minnesota Power, ComfortSystems and AEOA, is the Energy Awareness Expo. Over the past 11 years, this annual event focused on providing energy information to low-income customers has become a staple within this community.

People line up outside the Salvation Army in Duluth well before the doors open, eager to enjoy a complimentary hot meal and learn how they can save on their utility bills. Each household receives an energy kit. In 2014, that included two CFL light bulbs, an LED bulb, a string of LED holiday lights, an LED nightlight, faucet aerators, a low-flow showerhead and a furnace-filter warning whistle.

Gary Yernberg, 63, and his girlfriend, Teddy Hill, were among the early arrivals, getting to the Salvation Army 90 minutes early.

“What I like most about (the Expo) is learning the many different ways you can save money,” Hill said when asked what attracted her to the annual Energy Awareness Expo. She enjoyed receiving the energy-saving products and seeing friends. “It is a very good program.”

Representatives of Minnesota Power’s Power of One® team distribute the kits and answer questions about energy efficiency. Additional staff members help qualified customers sign up for the CARE program, which is administered

by AEOA on behalf of Minnesota Power. CARE-eligible households can lower their energy costs with a discounted rate and establish a budget payment plan.

The Energy Awareness Expo is an important way to connect with customers and for AEOA to identify income-eligible people who qualify for its weatherization services and for Energy Partners.

“We get a lot of new applicants through the event,” said Laakkonen, who also helps organize the Energy Awareness Expo. “It is a great day.”

Another component of the Energy Partners Program is an annual “Listening Session” with the agencies that help deliver Minnesota Power’s low-income programs. The bulk of this event is focused on gathering feedback from the agencies and brainstorming ways to best serve low-income customers. “The Listening Session provides the perfect venue for gathering insights and ideas to strengthen the Energy Partners program,” Oja said. “The partnership we share with these agencies is essential to providing quality programs to our low-income customers.”

Energy Partners continues to be an important aspect of Minnesota Power’s overall conservation program and to the community at large.

“This program provides customers with valuable tools and resources to take ownership of their energy usage and get the most for their energy dollars,” Oja said. “Collaborating with provider networks and other partners enables Minnesota Power to deliver an impactful energy conservation program while connecting some of our most economically challenged customers with essential services and resources.”