

2011 Energy Awareness Expo



About 900 people on low or fixed incomes came to the Salvation Army building on the west side of Duluth Thursday, October 27th, for the Energy Awareness Expo. This annual event is collaboratively sponsored by the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA), Minnesota Power and Duluth's ComfortSystems.

At noon, a line of people snaked down a hallway into the gymnasium, where tables around the perimeter offered staff, information and applications related to help with paying for housing, electricity and gas, fuel oil, conservation and assorted social services.

At tables in the middle of the gym, Jackie Robertson and many other invited guests ate complimentary lunches of sliced pork on a bun, chips and assorted salads and drinks. Robertson, a 46-year-old mother of four employed at an assisted living facility, said she comes to the Energy Expo every year.

"Last year I signed up for the weatherization program," she said "My husband's laid off, and I'm the only worker." She was accompanied Thursday by her mother, Judy Johnson, a brother and a sister-in-law.

Robertson said her visit to the Expo last year led to her receiving a weatherization grant that paid for insulation, a new furnace and ductwork at her west Duluth home. This year, Robertson said, she came to the Expo and found assistance of another kind.

"I got the paperwork I needed from Community Action for help on my taxes," she explained. "I didn't completely understand it, but I'll do what I can and send it in."

Over its eight year existence, the Expo has expanded its range of services. Sometimes the requirements to receive assistance are difficult to understand as well as accomplish. That's one reason why Minnesota Power set up an "education room" at the Salvation Army, where employees explained new and existing programs and offered ways to get the most out of them.

"This additional room provided an opportunity for customers to learn about MP's conservation programs and sign up for the new CARE rate," said MP Marketing Coordinator Amanda Oja. Members of AEOA Virginia, MP Call Center employees, and MP's Conservation Improvement Program team staffed the room and answered questions about energy conservation, budget billing, the cold weather rule, and the CARE rate.

CARE, a new program that stands for "Customer Affordability of Residential Electricity," offers electric bill discounts to income-qualified households.

"This was my first time attending and it was very impressive," said Director of Customer Service Luann LaValley. "I could see that our customers appreciate seeing us in the public offering them energy saving tips and answering their questions regarding their electric bills. It was such a great, opportune time for us to also introduce our CARE program."

Senior Marketing Analyst George Agriesti, a member of MP's CIP team, patiently explained to potential CARE recipients the requirements: completion of a Low Income Home Energy Assistance application, submission of a CARE application, completion of the Your Home Energy Report, and the participant's agreement to be placed on a budget payment plan.

After showing one woman a table that displayed how much she could save through CARE on her electric bill each month, he then brought out the contents of the “energy savings kits” MP gave to 700 Expo participants. He showed her how each item could help her reduce the kilowatt hours she used.

MP partnered with ComfortSystems to provide the energy-saving kits, which included CFL bulbs, a refrigerator thermometer, shower timer, plugged-in devices timer, LED nightlight, window shrink wrap, weather-stripping and faucet aerators.

“When you combine the reduced CARE electric rate with fewer kilowatt-hours, that’s how you can really maximize your savings,” Agriesti said.

Many other MP employees volunteered at the Expo, including Amanda Heimbach, Heidi Peura, Bonnie Yoder, George Radosevich, Barb Stock, Teresa Savich, Marcia Campbell, Karen Virta, Luann LaValley, Tina Koecher, Al Lian, Debbie Buczynski, Tim Gallagher, Craig Kedrowski and Chad Trebilcock.

Food left over from the Energy Awareness Expo was donated to CHUM, Churches United in Ministry.

“This is an exceptional event that allows us to hear firsthand from our customers, offer solutions to help them get the most for their energy dollars, and make a difference in the community,” said Tina Koecher, manager of billing and energy efficiency.

“This was an incredible demonstration of teamwork amongst MP employees and other service providers in the area to help customers in need.”