

Energy Co-op of Vt. S-171 Testimony to Senate Natural Resources Committee

Vermont Legislature

March 28, 2019

- My name is Brian Gray. I am the General Manager of the Energy Co-op of Vermont. Before joining the Energy Co-op I was employed by Vermont Gas for nearly 30 years. At Vermont Gas I served in a variety of positions, the most recent as Energy Services Manager where I was responsible for Sales & Marketing and the Energy Efficiency Utility.
- The Energy Co-op of Vermont is a member owned, not for profit energy provider that delivers fuel oil, kerosene, and wood pellets. We maintain and install heating equipment including cold climate heat and heat pump water heaters. We provide energy efficiency services including energy audits, energy coaching and home weatherization. We have approximately 2,000 members in northwestern Vermont.
- The Co-op's mission is to help our members reduce their energy use and help transition them from fossil fuels to more efficient and renewable home heating options.
- One of the core services central to our mission is to provide energy audits and weatherize homes for our members. Energy audits and energy coaching are instrumental to the homeowner in providing them a road map on how to achieve energy efficiency and develop a plan to transition to renewables.
- Currently the Energy Co-op has 1 Energy Auditor and a weatherization crew which consists of a crew chief and 2 technicians. On average we complete 100 energy audits and 60 home weatherization projects per year.
- The biggest hurdle in expanding our weatherization services at the Co-op is the availability of technicians. Insulating and air sealing homes is a tough

and dirty job that requires a certain amount of physical abilities as well as an aptitude for carpentry and mechanical operations. To get to our current level of expertise and staffing it took approximately 2 years. Over that period, we were unable to find candidates that had experience in the field, so we hired and provided on the job training from the ground up. This was an arduous process. We hired multiple technicians who had never worked in the weatherization field. Once they were on the job for a few weeks many found that that the type of work was not for them. Fortunately, through this trial and error process we eventually found individuals that stuck it out and after approximately 6 months of on the job training have become very good technicians.

- Inability to hire weatherization positions is not unique to the field. At the Energy Co-op we struggle to find qualified HVAC technicians and delivery drivers. The availability of a trades related work force is essential in our ability to sustain and grow our business.
- I feel the biggest barrier to expanding weatherization services is not the ability to find “trained employees” it’s the ability to find “any employees” who are interested and willing to do this type of work.
- Publicly available training for weatherization techs is available within the State. Building Performance Institute (BPI) Certification courses are offered by State technical colleges a few times per year. These courses are very good and go into a great deal of depth. I feel these offerings are geared more for Energy Auditors as opposed to weatherization technicians.
- Efficiency Vermont offers periodic air sealing and insulation courses.
- At the high school level, students who go through Building trades or Carpentry specific Technical programs receive class room training on insulating and air sealing which provide a good base for further education.

- Training for weatherization techs is like other fields such as carpentry, plumbing and electrical where knowledge is gained through class room offerings, but the real training is done as an apprentice working on the job.
- The learning curve for a weatherization tech is shorter than in some other fields. Practically speaking someone with a building trades back ground can be fully functional as a weatherization tech within 4 weeks. Others with less building trades experience may take 4 to 6 months to become fully functional.
- According to estimates provided by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) the Weatherization program currently completes about 800-900 low income eligible homes each year.
- In order to double the number of low-income completions OEO would need to increase the number of crews available for this work significantly. By extrapolating the Energy Co-op's production rate of weatherization project completions of approximately 1.15 homes per week per crew, I would estimate an increase of 13-15 additional weatherization crews (40-60 employees) would be needed to double the number of completions from 850 homes per year to 1,700 per year.
- As noted earlier, there are essentially no trained weatherization technicians available at his time and a limited number of people interested in doing this type of work. Acquiring 40-60 new employees would require significant time and training.
- The OEO Weatherization program is currently delivered through the 5 community-based providers who hire and train staff to deliver weatherization services.
- An alternative to increasing staff within OEO would be to develop more public/private partnerships.

- Existing private contractors like the Energy Co-op could provide weatherization services to OEO's clients immediately with its existing staff. Delivery of services could be ramped up much quicker because of direct access to a trained workforce. The costs and risks involved in growing and training a new work force could be transferred to the private contractors.
- In the short term there are currently 44 private contractors listed by Efficiency Vermont under the heading for insulation & air sealing services. These contractors are located throughout all corners of Vermont.
- In the longer term, opportunities for private companies to expand into energy related services such as weatherization dovetails very well with the decrease in need for labor in the fossil fuel infrastructure and distribution business. Local fuel dealers are looking for alternative business opportunities in the energy sector and a public/private partnerships can be a win – win scenario for all parties.