

## **Testimony for House Energy and Digital Infrastructure on S.219**

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For the record, my name is Cara Robechek and I'm the Deputy Director & Network Manager at Energy Action Network. My colleague Jared Duval has testified in this committee in the past and so I know you are aware of EAN as both a nonprofit that does data analysis and reporting, and as a broad network of partners working together to achieve Vermont's climate and energy commitments in ways that create a more just, thriving, and sustainable future. As you also know EAN does not lobby for or against bills before the legislature, and thus I am just here to share information.

One of my main roles at EAN is to support collaboration on energy and climate issues among our broad network of utilities, businesses, nonprofits, institutions of higher education, and public sector partners. At EAN's Annual Network Summit in November 2025, several new initiatives were proposed. One of these was a team that was established to look at the possibility of expanding energy coaching throughout the state of Vermont.

As a first step in that process, the co-chairs of that group interviewed people who work in or adjacent to energy coaching in Vermont. The co-chairs who conducted these interviews were Mike Roy from the Climate Economy Action Center of Addison County, Michelle McCutchinson-Schour from Efficiency Vermont, and myself.

In all we conducted 21 interviews and spoke with all three of the energy efficiency utilities and several other electric utilities, energy coaches and others in the Weatherization Assistance Program at community action programs, educational nonprofits, and with people who do coaching both through a nonprofit model and as contractors or consultants.

The question we were exploring was: Would Vermont residents benefit from a statewide network of local energy coaches, utilizing volunteers? We asked questions about the scope and scale of work done by the organizations we were speaking with. We also asked them about the challenges homeowners, property owners, and renters face in completing clean energy projects; what the gaps are for helping people complete energy projects to reduce or eliminate fossil fuel use; their opinions on whether households would benefit from the creation of a network of local energy coaches and the roles that volunteers might play; and the role that their organizations might play in such a network.

Our primary key finding was that funding remains the biggest challenge in terms of accomplishing work that will reduce emissions from fossil fuels and reduce energy expenses. There are many entities that are already doing good work, and could do more if more funding were available, including the Weatherization Assistance Programs and the Energy Efficiency Utilities. A second finding was that system and project complexity can be a big challenge. And the elephant in the room is that it is really hard to help renters in this space.

When we asked whether volunteers from the community can help, we heard yes they can, but pretty much every respondent said this with a caveat. Volunteers can be helpful, but they can also

do more harm than good if they give incorrect technical advice, or if they give incorrect information about programs, or if their work complicates a system that is already fragmented and can be confusing.

In fact there are a number of things that complicate this work and that no volunteer network of energy coaches is going to be able to address. This includes the fact that Vermont has a complex web of programs. It includes the fact that funding and financing options are lacking. Several people stated that there are too few weatherization and clean energy contractors in the state. And interviewees pointed out that some homes are just really hard to electrify or to weatherize, because of structural issues.

When we talked about where coaches could add value, we heard mostly about project management and communication. Most volunteer coaches don't have the expertise to give technical advice, and so their work is an add on to the work that professionals are doing through the Weatherization Assistance Program, the Energy Efficiency Utilities like Efficiency Vermont, Burlington Electric, and VGS, and the work of skilled contractors.

However, energy coaches can help in Project Management. They can translate technical information from the experts to be more understandable to the consumer. They can help customers talk through their next steps and a scope of work. They might be able to help apply for rebates and programs. And they can help call contractors and interpret reports and quotes. So in this project management role they are assisting in the work being done by skilled and trained professionals.

Volunteers can also add significant value in communications. They can elevate outreach by sharing their personal stories, building neighbor to neighbor support, and social norming - making it so that people understand that these sorts of projects are a normal thing and lots of people are doing them.

We also heard that energy coaching is not simple. Volunteers have to be trained in social skills and sales as well as some technical skills if they're going to be effective in this role. And a volunteer network would have to be very well supported by professionals with ongoing training, with funding, ongoing support, and coordination across programs.

EAN has committed to continue to support this conversation among our members. We currently have a survey deployed to solicit feedback on the sort of information I've just given to you, with an end date in June. We'll be happy to share anything that comes out of that survey.

I want to end by coming back to this slide because I think it is important that we don't lose the fact that the biggest challenge for low and moderate income Vermonters who want to improve their energy efficiency, is the lack of ongoing and consistent funding for energy efficiency work. Coaches and navigator programs can be helpful, but it is important to remember that they don't replace the need for funding for the very effective programs that we already have in the state.