

CINCINNATI

WarmUp Cincy


Background

When the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE) published a report in 2016 tracking energy efficiency in American cities, it revealed a concerning trend in Cincinnati: the city's low-income residents and renters had disproportionately high energy bills. In fact, the median percentage of income those residents were putting toward energy bills, known as energy burden, was the eighth highest in the country.

Another study, from the Greater Cincinnati Energy Alliance, found that more than a dozen of the city's 52 neighborhoods were energy impoverished, meaning that average household energy burdens exceeded 6 percent. The problem was particularly acute in Black households, where nearly 7 percent of total incomes went to energy bills compared with 4 percent for the city overall, according to the ACEEE.


Energy affordability is part of a broader economic issue facing the city, where nearly a third of residents live in poverty. In response, in 2018 Cincinnati launched its revised Green Cincinnati Plan, which includes a goal to lower the average household energy burden in the city by 10 percent in five years. By including energy burden in the Green Cincinnati Plan, the city signaled an awareness that energy affordability isn't only an issue of poverty, but also one of climate and sustainability. Expensive energy bills are often due to building inefficiencies, leading to higher energy use and therefore higher emissions. Efficient structures utilize energy more effectively, lowering costs.

When the city launched its WarmUp Cincy program in 2020, it took aim at both energy costs and emissions. The program received technical assistance through the American Cities Climate Challenge and partnered with nonprofits like Hamilton County Community Action Agency and People Working Cooperatively to bring free building



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retrofits—like updated window insulation and new appliances—and energy efficiency knowledge to energy-burdened residents. Funding was secured through a rate case negotiation with Duke Energy Ohio, the state utility. As a result, the city was awarded \$250,000 annually for five years to invest in programs to serve households struggling with energy burden.

To identify neighborhoods with the greatest need, WarmUp Cincy formed a partnership with a research team at the University of Cincinnati to map out city residents' energy burden at a granular level. The goal was to leave the Cincinnati building stock more efficient and to have residents see a drop in costs and a quality-of-life bump. "We wanted to ensure that energy savings, cost savings, increased comfort, improved air quality, and greater building durability were prioritized outcomes in our program," Carla Walker, climate advisor to the city of Cincinnati, says.

WarmUp Cincy

WarmUp Cincy was launched with three program components to help both building owners and tenants implement housing upgrades that could cut energy costs. Two of these program components focus on building owners and provide incentives for building upgrades. The first owner-focused component matches upgrade projects dollar for dollar with payments of up to \$5,000. A second program component focuses on whole-building retrofit projects and provides up to \$200,000, which includes studying the impact of the improvements over three years. However, the main focus of WarmUp Cincy is on residents themselves. The tenant-focused program brings free retrofit upgrades and energy efficiency education to residents. For a household to be eligible, its total income has to be below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and it has to reside in a multifamily building that was plugged into Duke's energy grid.

When residents sign up for the program, they're connected with People Working Cooperatively, a local nonprofit that offers families an in-unit energy assessment and free energy-efficient retrofits. Families that complete the upgrades receive a \$250 credit on their Duke Energy account. Participants also get access to

educational resources. According to Kelsey Hawkins-Johnson, a Public Allies sustainability fellow supporting the effort, the educational component of the program includes "energy savings tips and instruction on how to reduce the cost of your electric bill." By completing the education section—which comes as a four-part online module—participants also become eligible for a second \$250 Duke Energy credit.

The educational element of the program may be the least glamorous, but it may have the largest long-term effect on the city. "We added [the] element that ensured folks were being educated so that, as people in this population might be more transient, they'd take this with them to another energy-inefficient unit and know how to speak to their landlord or building owner about providing energy efficiency savings," Walker says. If successful, education around energy efficiency will filter through conversations and communities.

To grab the attention of local residents, Climate Challenge partner Vision Flourish, a marketing consultancy that works with cities and nonprofit initiatives, built out a WarmUp Cincy marketing plan. Ultimately the consultancy's work included providing the city with marketing assets, like an informational flyer that has been distributed at community events.

To date, WarmUp Cincy has provided 200 families with energy efficiency support, with more than half completing the educational program or receiving upgrades.

Adapting to Changes

Just weeks after WarmUp Cincy launched in February 2020, COVID-19 hit. Suddenly, Walker remembers, "we had to become very flexible to ensure that our program services were still being provided." With many of these services offered in person, the lockdown took some wind out of the program's sails. Because of the pandemic, the initial provider of the education platform shuttered, and People Working Cooperatively, the provider of free upgrades, received a stop-work order. The city was able to run the education program directly, and People Working Cooperatively would be able to

resume its services soon, but inaugural program participants needed to be reassured that the disruptions were irregular—not par for the course.

Later during the pandemic, the utility initiated a moratorium on service disconnections to provide some relief for struggling families. Important as this may have been, one unfortunate side effect was that it “created an atmosphere where families felt secure in not applying or registering for the program,” Walker says. “We had to do some juggling to reassure folks that this was still a valuable program to go through.”


Often, reaching participants or potential participants proved to be a challenge. “When I made the calls to families, what I overall encountered was not getting through to someone over the line,” says Hawkins-Johnson. Sometimes, she found that phone lines had been disconnected or phone numbers were outdated. “Our population is one that’s transient,” she says, echoing Walker. Other times, it was difficult to convince potential enrollees that the program was even legitimate. Over the phone, some residents found the offers suspicious or believed they wouldn’t qualify because they were already enrolled in other, state-affiliated support programs.

Looking Ahead

Now, Walker says, WarmUp Cincy is reflecting on its experience and distilling learnings for future projects. “Having someone responsible for this program,” she says, “is going to be hypercritical—as we transition out of the American Cities Climate Challenge—for the city to really manage this moving forward.” Whether that support comes directly through public dollars or through philanthropic routes is unclear, but Walker’s hope is that the lessons learned over the course of the project can be leveraged to improve delivery to families who need these services most.

“The biggest a-ha moment was hearing how difficult it is to provide these free services to this population,” says Walker. Bringing green benefits to people becomes easier when they’re not preoccupied with concerns around eviction, employment, child care, or other challenges.

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