

Program Finds Community “Readiness” Is the Key to More Retrofits

In 2010, Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partner BetterBuildings for Michigan launched an energy efficiency program through neighborhood “sweeps” in 58 communities across the state. Through this effort, BetterBuildings for Michigan developed a “readiness scale,” or a way to determine each community’s readiness to make energy upgrades. Over a three-year period, the program facilitated energy efficiency improvements in more than 11,000 homes across Michigan. Following is an abridged transcript of an interview with Mary Templeton, former BetterBuildings for Michigan program manager and current executive director of Michigan Saves, and Jacob Corvidae, interim executive director of EcoWorks, one of BetterBuildings for Michigan’s program partners.

What did your neighborhood sweeps program test in these communities, and what did you learn?

Templeton: The program tested everything from incentives and marketing messages to partner organizations and interest rates. Ultimately, the sweeps showed what worked in different communities, and what factors drove people’s decisions. Most importantly, we learned that every community is different, and that a key element to consider is the community’s “readiness factor,” or how ready it is to engage in a conversation about energy efficiency. In communities that were ready, we weren’t spending as much money on marketing and outreach, because they were the ones calling us.

What factors correlated to a community completing more upgrades?

Corvidae: I think that there are three main areas influencing program success, in terms of encouraging energy upgrades. First is what the program actually offers, including both the work being done and any incentives. Second is the skill and capacity of the people delivering the program, from the marketing and outreach team to the contractors, who are critical to the program’s success. Finally, you have to consider community readiness for the program. Of these three main areas, readiness is the one we have the least amount of control over, making it especially important that we figure out the key factors determining readiness.

What factors determine a community’s readiness for energy upgrades?

Templeton: A lot of factors go into community readiness, including the community’s type of housing stock, economic demographics, the presence of a credible messenger who is passionate about your cause to spread the word about your program, and whether or not the community has been exposed to messages about energy efficiency. In communities that are ready to invest in the program, we have found that there’s already a conversation going on about energy efficiency. It’s also important that the community is open to or already has some degree of knowledge about energy efficiency. Another significant factor is the strength of the neighborhood’s word-of-mouth capabilities. A neighborhood can have all the right demographic information, but you have to consider whether or not the neighbors actually talk to each other.

Corvidae: Many of the factors we looked at—such as education level in a community, age of household, median income, and even age of residency—were important, but still not enough to fully assess which communities would succeed. One of the prime factors that went into community readiness was whether or not there were communication networks already in place within the community. This could include formal communication networks, such as a local paper or a newsletter

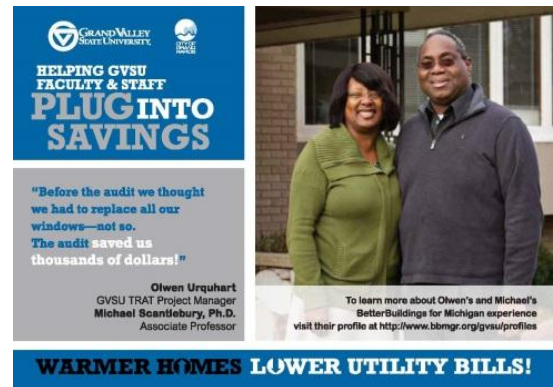
put out by a place of worship or neighborhood association, or informal networks such as word of mouth. From there, we also had to consider the extent to which people were engaged with these communication networks.

Did you develop specific techniques for identifying aspects of community readiness?

Corvidae: We started asking community partners to tell us why they would be a good place to bring the program. We followed up by asking them to gather petition signatures from residents in the community, to gauge interest in the program. If an applicant could only gather 20 signatures indicating interest in the program, that would give us information about both the number of people who might be interested and the applicants' organizing capacity. The initial petition is an imperfect measure, but it's still a way to gauge how well a community partner is going to be able to get the word out and have people respond.

How did assessing readiness change how your program determined which communities to target?

Corvidae: Considering the importance of communication networks to community readiness, we came to increasingly define community as a place where these networks exist, as opposed to a strict focus on geographic neighborhoods. In many cases, they existed around schools, workplaces, or places of worship, which were more likely to have word-of-mouth potential and formal communication networks. Places like churches, synagogues, or workplaces have an advantage, as they already have established means to disseminate information. [To read about one workplace where the program had great success tapping into an existing communications network, read this Focus Series interview: [It's Academic: Better Buildings for Michigan Partners With University to Reach Employees.](#)]



To learn more about Olwen's and Michael's BetterBuildings for Michigan experience visit their profile at <http://www.bbmgr.org/gvsu/profiles>

Once you decided to do a neighborhood sweep, how did you engage audiences?

Templeton: As the program moved forward, we began focusing on inspiring people to take action through stories or anecdotes about what happened with their neighbors. Messaging that focused only on saving money and offering incentives wasn't as affective as more personal messages. For example, we might frame it this way: "Grandma used to have to wear a sweater when she visited, but after getting this work done, she no longer needs the sweater, and you can keep your heat at 68 degrees in the winter." These were the types of stories that compelled people to take action.

Corvidae: One thing that was not in place when we were doing the sweeps that has since emerged is the social media site Next Door, which is a Facebook-style social networking app for geographic neighborhoods. It allows neighbors to share information about services in their area, and it can facilitate neighborhood communication and engagement in the program.

Are there any tools your program developed as a result of these efforts?

Corvidae: We developed a community readiness assessment tool that is part of a larger Web app called Actioniirs, which we developed at EcoWorks. Actioniirs helps people make sustainability-related changes in their homes and communities, and it includes a feature where organizers can assess what actions their community is interested in and ready to undertake. Within the app, the organizer can create a group, which members of their community can join. The tool helps you to gather information from group members; for example, getting a large percentage of your community to join your group and complete an assessment is a good indicator of the community's readiness to make energy efficiency upgrades.

How did you use this tool to customize your program to suit different communities?

Corvidae: When people signed up, they could also tell us their personal goals and motivations for energy efficiency work, be they saving money or being green. With this information, we could tailor marketing materials to the community's dominant interest. This feature also told us what actions a community was ready for. If we saw that a community had already done basic energy efficiency work, we would need to refocus our efforts toward a deeper retrofit program.

What advice would you give other programs interested in launching energy efficiency programs in communities?

Templeton and Corvidae:

- ▶ **Know your target.** The readiness factor is important to understanding where each community is, in terms of how prepared they are to take action and invest in the program. Communities that were ready typically already had messages about energy efficiency in place, and we didn't need to conduct as much marketing and outreach. Instead, they were the ones approaching us about the program.
- ▶ **Engage all stakeholders.** Identify your stakeholders and communicate with them early and often. We set up a steering committee and stakeholder council that included utilities, state stakeholders, contractors, and others involved in the periphery of what we were doing. Listen to their feedback to adapt your program in a way that makes sense for the marketplace.
- ▶ **Find the right approach for each community.** Every community is ready for an energy efficiency program, but they're not all ready for the same energy efficiency program. Take the time to find out which communities are right for the program you are offering and what angle will make energy efficiency relevant to them.
- ▶ **Personalize communication to encourage word-of-mouth.** Remove barriers to internal communication by providing easy to use tools, such as an email that community members can forward to friends or neighbors. People will be more receptive to messaging that comes directly from people they know, so be sure to ask and remind your partners to do this.
- ▶ **Use trusted messengers.** In one community, a nonprofit well known to the community spread the word about our program to their members, local co-ops, and other people engaged in the conversation about energy efficiency. In turn, those people told their friends. The nonprofit used pictures of people from the community to broadcast the message, and word just spread.

Learn more about assessing community readiness with [EcoWorks' Actioniirs app](#).

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