

Rural Energy Conservation Program Powered by Collaboration

Background

Winona County, located in Southeastern Minnesota, is committed when it comes to community action on energy issues. Between networks of conservation-minded individuals, forward-thinking public officials, active local organizers, and an increasingly engaged public, the community has made progress on energy-related issues at an impressive pace and has utilized creative ways to support its residents and the community's energy goals.

Currently, four electric utilities serve households across Winona County—an investor-owned utility (Xcel Energy), two energy co-operatives (MiEnergy Cooperative and People's Energy Cooperative), and a municipal utility (City of Saint Charles). In addition to providing the County's residents with electricity services, the utilities offer the community resources and programs to meet their energy efficiency and sustainability goals, though the offerings vary. Of the four utilities, Xcel Energy's portfolio of energy efficiency programs is the largest and serves the majority of the county's population.



Challenge

An ongoing challenge has been to connect all of the County's residents with energy-conserving opportunities and financial savings through utility programs and rebates. Households across Winona County served by Xcel Energy are eligible to receive home energy audits and energy efficiency improvements through Xcel Energy's Conservation Improvement Programs (CIP). Among the most popular is the Home Energy Squad®. Despite the availability of these services, Winona County's distance from the Twin Cities metro area and the absence of a local organizing partner meant that the Home Energy Squad was unable to serve Winona County residents. This left many rural households unable to access the energy-saving opportunities available to them—until now.

Solution: Partners and Process

Sustain Winona, a partnership of local government, education, and community partners, received a grant through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) to organize and lead a series of projects, primarily focused on energy and water in Winona County. The project's energy-focused goal was to expand access to energy efficiency improvements for households across the county. In order to ensure that energy efficiency is within reach for all Winona County residents, a segment of the grant funds were dedicated to low- and fixed-income home energy audits.

Project Snapshot



224 total households served



1,541% increase in Winona County Low Income Home Energy Squad visits



\$34,000 estimated Conservation Improvement Programs value



137,574 kWh of estimated annual electricity savings



15,211 therms of estimated annual natural gas savings

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In order to identify solutions that would bring the utility's efficiency programs to Winona County, Sustain Winona turned to Xcel Energy and Semcac, a local Community Action Agency. Through a brief work session, the partners identified an opportunity for coordination that would enable Winona residents to receive Home Energy Squad visits and other low-income services implemented through Semcac.

Addressing Residents in Need

Semcac initially identified 34 Winona County households eligible for Low Income Home Energy Squad visits and secured their participation in the program. However, once the Winona Housing & Redevelopment Authority (HRA) joined the project, the number of participating households increased dramatically.

After learning about the available funding and opportunity, the HRA's plan was to offer audits to a few interested residents. However, the HRA ultimately chose to implement the energy audits in all 170 qualifying family residential units. In a matter of three months, the efficiency improvements in the HRA's housing stock moved from proposal to plan to completion—resulting in a large investment in community energy efficiency valued at \$34,000—at no cost to the residents. To further the reach of Xcel Energy's conservation programs, the City of Winona is incorporating program and rebate information into their own home rehabilitation efforts, supporting greater savings for area households.

Results

This first-of-its-kind coordination in Xcel Energy territory between the utility, Sustain Winona, the HRA, and Semcac expanded local capacity for rural energy efficiency improvements while leveraging existing funds dedicated to energy conservation. In 2017, 197 Winona County households received Low Income Home Energy Squad visits, up from only 12 conducted in 2016. The collaboration successfully maximized resources for the community: while Winona County Home Energy Squad visits made up nearly 18% of Xcel Energy's Low Income Home Energy Squad activity statewide in 2017, the county's residents represent less than 3% of the customer base. Between the Home Energy Squad visits and Home Energy Savings Programs made possible by Semcac's local presence, a total of 233 Winona County households were served.

Today, Winona County continues to benefit from these energy efficiency improvements: a second wave of energy audits and Home Energy Squad visits are currently in development.

"I only had the HES visit about a month ago and I am already seeing savings in my heating costs. I've had the lowest energy bill I've ever received since completing the energy audit."

TAYLOR,
A RESIDENT OF BELLEVIEW EAST

For more about Winona County's progress on energy and water conservation, visit sustainwinona.org

Partners

