

Nov. 2 EEAC Testimony – Susan Olshuff, ener-G-save.com, community organizer

I'm very grateful for the process you all are going thru to make the next 3-year plan always more and more effective than the ones before.

My name is Susan Olshuff and I work with ener-G-save, working in Pioneer Valley since 2016, encouraging people to take advantage of the Mass Save and CAP agencies to get energy audits and efficiency work done. As a small nonprofit dedicated to maximize the use of the State's programs to save energy, while helping people save money and be healthier too, we've done everything from knocking on doors, tabling wherever people were gathered, organizing at houses of worship, working with schools, neighborhoods, with towns, and whatever else we could try.

We have had a lot of pretty direct contact with people we have served, and have seen a lot of happy customers both of MS and CAP agencies.

By being on the ground, I also have seen a lot of people fall through the cracks with unfortunate experiences. As you are working on the next 3-year plan, I am glad to offer here some thoughts on issues I hope you all will take a serious look at in the upcoming workshops. Today, in this submission, I just want to address a few areas regarding the CAP agencies in particular.

Primary on my mind right now, and I've heard this expressed by the EEAC in recent meetings, is the urgent need to seriously **address issues of inequity** throughout our agencies. We need to identify what the obstacles are to knowing who has already been served in each CAP agency's turf. What specific neighborhoods and zip codes have been served and at what level of service? We need specific data on numbers of people served, per income level, per race, per language spoken.

With commitments stated publicly toward equity, it is essential to have **accurate data** on what has already been accomplished so that efforts can be made to serve those not yet served. Good data could point the way, and it would be helpful to make it available, without compromising individuals' confidentiality of course, to community organizations and any municipal committees that work on energy and efficiency issues as well.

I also urge you to include the need for this sort of data in every upcoming workshop, as I believe there is much work to be done in this arena. We can be proud of the national reputation of Massachusetts in energy efficiency work, but we can be prouder still if this work includes **environmental equity** across the board in how we are thinking and directing our next three years of programming. **Let us lead the way.**

Along these lines, I urge you all to have discussions asking why there are no (or few) businesses owned and operated by people of color (at least that I know of in Pioneer Valley) doing audits and efficiency improvements for their neighborhoods. What is needed for this to change now? Can we invest in training people in the fields of efficiency and renewables and emerging technologies while at the same time invest in the development of people of color, of poverty, of language difficulties? What would this take? Would these steps not lead to greater levels of service in frontline communities? **Let us prioritize walking the talk.**

One of the big challenges in low income neighborhoods, we've seen, is being able to **schedule an energy audit**. We have heard again and again from people that they can't get through to the weatherization line

at their local CAP agency, or that they leave messages that are not returned. We recognize that when we have followed up with people about their CAP agency experience, they may be embarrassed to tell us they didn't make the call or haven't done it yet, so we hear white lies. But we have heard the frustration expressed so many times, as well as done our own experiments calling and waiting for return calls, that we know there is a level of improvement that is needed in setting up the initial appointments for audits. Is this a question of more funding needed? More staff? Better systems? Can we find and replicate best practices from around the State if there are some that stand out?

Could it be possible that grassroots organizations (like ener-g-save) could gather names/numbers/emails and give these lists to the CAPs directly? We've been turned away when we've offered to do this. There have got to be better ways to **make it easy** for the very people who are dealing with multiple life challenges to line up an audit that can save them needed money. We are also aware some CAP agencies automatically sign anyone approved for fuel assistance for an energy audit. Others require people to call a different office on their own. Please **consider consistency of best and most productive practices**.

Ener-G-save's experience with Pioneer Valley CAP agencies has been colored by **inconsistency**. At times there have been waiting lists. At times, we have been told there is plenty of money, not enough staff. Other times, we've been told that work stopped in early December as goals had been met, even though I know there were people waiting for their audits still. Is more money needed? More staff? More trainings? There needs to be a consistent message so people are not misled. When people challenged in many areas of life are not able to get simple and straightforward information about getting an audit, they become cynical. **Cynicism is a danger** to our work to conserve energy for sure.

One last area I'd like to address here is that of **renters and landlords**. The last 3-year plan acknowledged this challenging arena, and still more needs to be done to deal with the large numbers of homes that fall into this category and haven't yet been audited. While some renters and landlords have been well served by the CAPs, many don't understand how it works and are confused, often being sent from one agency to another. Clarification and outreach in many languages could be very helpful. Again, data in this area could also ensure that ALL communities are provided the opportunities for lowering their utility costs. There needs to be straightforward guidelines on what renters can do on their own, and what they need to do in order for more work to be done with their landlord's permission. Landlords need to understand how to handle properties with both low income and market rate residents. Do they approach Mass Save or the CAP agency? What benefits will they receive?

At ener-G-save, we have found that many, if not most, of the renters we've spoken with are reluctant to engage with their landlords. Just before the start of Covid, a few of the utilities as well as ener-g-save on its own organized workshops for landlords, inviting them to learn how efficiency upgrades can improve their properties and help retain tenants, and what financial incentives could help them make those changes. They were well attended, but I believe we all found that because it is the tenants who often pay the utility bills, it is a hard sell. We urge you to pursue the possibility of more **100% incentives** to landlords, surely for low and moderate income residences. One project we're familiar with sent letters to landlords telling them about the 100% offers (mailing paid for by local HPC), and the response was much bigger than expected. We also urge you to consider, if there are to be workshops, that there is some sort of reward for signing up for an audit right there at the workshop, rather than allowing landlords to leave, saying they'll think about it.

I hope these thoughts might be helpful. I've been proud of the MassSave reputation, and want Massachusetts to ever improve for the sake of our State and the Country. You will, no doubt, hear more from me soon!

Thank you for reading, and for your hard work. I know this is tough and complicated stuff.

Warmly,

Susan Olshuff