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# Elmhurst Alderman Spreads the Word About Energy Efficiency Program, Rebates for Homeowners

Noticing cold winds even before you step outside? Time to make some improvements to energy efficiency; the federal government is offering rebates and other perks to get it done.

By Karen Chadra | [Email the author](#) | October 29, 2012

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About a half-dozen Elmhurst residents with really old homes—the oldest built in 1889—gathered at 1st Ward Alderman Diane Gutenkauf's 1927 home last week to hear how they can save money on making their homes more energy efficient.

They learned that virtually every area single-family homeowner has been paying for years into a program for residential energy efficiency upgrades, and they are eligible to get that money back—and then some—to seal up and better insulate their homes. A relatively unknown program, available to all Nicor and ComEd customers, can provide the upgrades for a fraction of the cost of a hiring a contractor—and the home doesn't have to be anywhere near 100 years old to take advantage of the program.

Matt Elmore, a field organizer for Energy Impact Illinois, asked Gutenkauf to help get the word out by hosting the party. Energy Impact Illinois is a coalition led by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning in partnership ComEd, Nicor and other energy providers, along with several municipalities.

From its website:

*"The current marketplace is not connecting the dots between financial institutions, home and building owners, contractors and energy efficiency. There is unrealized economic value that could be captured by these groups if they acted in coordination. ... Energy Impact Illinois is a collaborative effort among its partners with the mission of helping residents, businesses and non-profits reduce energy use. The alliance provides simplified access to information, financial mechanisms and workforce resources that empower people to make their own energy impact."*

The program is funding by the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the US Department of Energy; \$25 million in grants are available, just in the Chicago area, alone.

Visitors to Gutenkauf's home got to see where her old house leaks and learn about the program.

"It just seemed to me that this was a great thing to do, especially as an alderman, to help others find out about rebates. And, I live in an old house," Gutenkauf said.

Sealing a home for energy efficiency is not as simple as it seems. Homeowners in their zeal to make a



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home tight can overdo it. If the house isn't breathing correctly, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, chemicals, cleaners and mold become trapped in the house as contaminants. Even old homes can be sealed too tightly. That's why an energy assessment is critical.

"We all get pamphlets in our utility bills about how to save energy," Elmore said. "But it can get pretty technical. The only way to get specific and analyze a home's unique issues is through a program like this."

He passed around a sample ComEd bill, with a circle around the portion every customer pays into the energy efficiency program.

ComEd and Nicor fund the programs with charges on customer bills. "It's really your money" Elmore said.

## The Math

The focus for the upgrade is on air-sealing and insulation, Elmore said.

"Those are the lowest cost, most effective upgrades a homeowner can make to reduce utility bills and make their home more comfortable," he said.

On average, the improvements cost about \$2,500, and that's for a full upgrade, he said.

The rebate is 70 percent of improvement cost, up to a maximum of \$1,750. When you take that off the \$2,500, the out of pocket expense is \$750. Savings average \$500 a year, so in a year and a half, the \$750 investment pays for itself. (Return on investment for window replacement is something like 40 or 50 years; do it for looks, but not for real savings, Elmore said.)

The rebate is instant, right off the top, and there is no paperwork involved for the homeowner, Elmore said. The contractors that perform the work deal with the rebate paperwork on the back end; homeowners only have to cover the out-of-pocket cost. Some might say the out-of-pocket is a deal-breaker, but Elmore says zero interest loans also are a part of this government program.

"We offer 0 percent subsidized loans. They're normally 6 to 8 percent, and we will pay that so homeowners have 0 percent the first year," Elmore said.

## The Process

The first step is a 2- to 3-hour energy assessment, which is followed by additional assessments by a program-approved contractor like Greg Galanos of Energy 360 Solutions in Wood Dale. Galanos demonstrated how he uses a blower device to measure how a home is "breathing," or the rate at which it replaces the inside air with outside air.

Gutenkauf's house was drawing 3,600 cubic feet of air per minute. A house the size of her's should be about 1,850 cubic feet, Galanos said.

"It's almost twice as leaky as the ideal," he said.

The contractor also will look at the attic, windows, electrical outlets, duct work, plumbing, lighting and "lots of little things," he said.

"When (home builders) drill holes from the attic to run outlets and light switches, they cut a 1-inch hold for a 1/2-inch piece of conduit, but they don't seal that up," Galanos said. "If you've got 20 of those, it really adds up. They're like little chimneys allowing heating dollars to escape."

He used an infrared device to measure air leaks around windows and doors. Gutenkauf's home has old, historic windows that are not efficient, but they can be improved without having to replace them.

## Other Perks

One added benefit of having an energy audit is that any safety issues will be addressed first, like gas leaks from a furnace or appliance.

At the end of the assessment, the homeowner will receive a report that lists every upgrade that can be made, the cost, how much the rebate will cover and the return on investment. Homeowners can do as many or as few of the upgrades as they wish.

They also will get up to 10 free compact fluorescent bulbs, insulation for piping, furnace and hot water heater, and low-flow shower heads and faucet aerators as part of the initial assessment.

Once the upgrades are complete, if there is a 15 percent improvement in efficiency, the home will receive an Energy Star certificate which will be included on the home's listing on the Multiple Listing Service, increasing a home's value.

## Step by step

- Sign up for a \$50 energy assessment by calling (855) 9-IMPACT. The \$50 is waived if the homeowner hosts a house party.
- Conservation Services Group, a nonprofit member of the Energy Impact Illinois alliance, completes the assessment and presents proposal with all possible energy efficiency upgrades to homeowner
- If homeowner decides to move forward, a Building Performance Institute-certified contractor will come out and complete the work.

The program ends in mid-May so those interested should begin the process as soon as possible, Elmore said.