

Vermont seeks to leverage success in weatherization numbers

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Vermont leads the nation in meeting goals for weatherizing low-income homes using stimulus funds, and a state official says that merits some special consideration from the federal government.

Shaun Donahue, director of the state's Office of Economic Opportunity, said he's asked federal energy officials to give unused stimulus weatherization money — assuming there is any once the program ends — to states that meet or exceed their goals.

“Certainly we could use them,” Donahue said of the funds. “We have homes that could be weatherized, and we have trained crews that will run out of (stimulus) funds before the project is over.”

The Energy Department doesn't expect to have leftover weatherization stimulus funds by March 31, 2012, the deadline for states to spend their allocations, Energy Department spokeswoman Stephanie Mueller said. But if it does, and the department is allowed to use it beyond the deadline, she said, “it is likely that the funds would be distributed to those states with an expressed need and a proven ability to spend funding rapidly and deliver high quality work.”

Mueller said an additional \$90 million in federal money for sustainable energy projects will be awarded competitively to states. The department is evaluating applications from nearly 30 states, including Vermont. States' performance using stimulus money will be one of the most important criteria for choosing recipients, she said.

The stimulus set aside nearly \$5 billion for the Energy Department's Weatherization Assistance Program to caulk windows, install weather stripping and take other steps to reduce power bills for nearly 590,000 homes belonging to low-income homeowners. With its share, at nearly \$17 million, Vermont planned to weatherize 1,612 homes.

By the end of March, the state was more than halfway toward meeting its goal and likely will exceed it, Donahue said. Thirty-seven other states weren't even a quarter of the way toward meeting their goals.

An Energy Department inspector general's audit of the program in February attributed states' slow progress to difficulties in meeting regulatory requirements and managing the influx of money.

The process was smoother for Vermont, because the state already had its own weatherization trust fund for low-income families, and it had a sophisticated weatherization network, said Paul Zabriskie, director of the Central Vermont Community Action Council's weatherization service.

Vermont needs weatherization more than other states, because the housing stock is old, and the winters, long, officials said. Even with the nearly \$17 million in stimulus money, many homes still need renovating.

Officials said additional federal funding is needed to ensure the nearly 75 Vermonters who got weatherization jobs because of the stimulus will have work when the money runs out.

“The goal of the weatherization stimulus funding was to build capacity, and then that capacity would migrate into the private sector and be doing everybody else's homes,” Zabriskie said. “The overall economic recovery is really putting a damper on that.”

The state has applied for \$4.9 million in sustainable energy grants from the Energy Department for weatherization work. It's also possible Congress will pass the Home Star rebate program, known as “cash for caulkers,” which would put people to work by giving homeowners incentives to become more energy-efficient. The bill, by Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., has passed the House but not the Senate.

“Each one of the weatherization programs is, quite frankly, working frantically to sustain their current workforce because they have invested in them, and they have them trained,” Donahue said.