

**Focus Group Findings on  
Community Energy Efficiency Programs  
Administered by the Washington State University Energy Program**



**August 2013**

#### **Acknowledgement**

This project is funded in whole or in part by funds made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

#### **Disclaimer**

This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.

---

© 2013 Washington State University Energy Program

This publication contains material written and produced for public distribution. You may reprint this written material, provided you do not use it to endorse a commercial product. Please reference by title and credit the Washington State University Energy Program.

WSUEEP13-030 • August 2013

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Focus Group Characteristics .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Non-Participants .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Importance of Energy-Related Issues .....	6
Home Energy Activities .....	8
A Focus on Products.....	8
<b>Participants .....</b>	<b>10</b>
Energy-Related Features of Their Homes .....	10
Benefits of Home Energy Activities .....	11
Participating in a Local CEEP .....	12
<b>Messaging and Benefits.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Channels and Messengers .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Utilities and PUDs.....	15
Universities and Higher Education .....	15
Government Agencies, Offices, and Officials .....	15
Non-Profits and Others .....	16
<b>Leaning Toward Local Talent .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Non-participants clearly felt they were on their own .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Non-participants should be the audience for additional outreach.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>People want to see people like themselves as spokespersons .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Universities were the clear choice as unbiased sources of information .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Building analysts are the ultimate source of reliable information .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Final thoughts on future messaging .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Appendix A: CEEP Sampling Strategy .....</b>	<b>A-1</b>
<b>Appendix B: Statewide Focus Group Facilitation Guide .....</b>	<b>B-1</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1. Self-Reported Focus Group Member Characteristics.....	5
Table 2. Benefits of Energy Efficiency Projects .....	14

## Executive Summary

---

Since 2010, the Washington State University (WSU) Energy Program's Community Energy Efficiency Program (CEEP) has been delivering home energy assessments and improvement resources in six areas around Washington state. To better understand how homeowners feel about the importance of residential energy efficiency and the value of home energy improvements, the WSU Energy Program conducted focus groups in each of the six areas served by local CEEP providers. Half of the focus group members had worked with their local CEEP provider and the other half did not. Homeowners were chosen to participate in the focus groups because they are numerous, easy to reach, and can make independent decisions about upgrades and changes to their property. The information that was gathered in the focus groups will be used to inform marketing campaigns for ongoing and future CEEP efforts at the local and state-wide levels.

As revealed during the focus group meetings, homeowners who participated in CEEP (referred to here as participants) felt like experts themselves, due to their involvement with the program. They felt well supported and were aware of the resources they could use to help them move toward their energy conservation goals. They readily acknowledged the value in feeling knowledgeable.

In contrast, those who did not participate in CEEP (referred to here as non-participants) clearly felt they were on their own in their efforts to make their homes more energy efficient and comfortable. They were often frustrated with the results of their efforts. Non-participants did not know who to turn to for reliable, unbiased information about energy efficiency improvements. They also expressed fear of being overcharged, the work being done incorrectly, or being sold something they did not need. They seemed unaware of the most effective, low-cost ways to make their homes more efficient.

Feedback from focus group members lead to the following conclusions:

- Non-participants should be the audience for additional outreach.
- People want to see people like themselves as spokespersons for information campaigns about home energy efficiency.
- Utilities and PUDs are important backers of energy efficiency work, but may be viewed with some distrust and frustration.
- Universities were the clear choice as unbiased sources of information.
- Local and state government offices are also needed for legitimacy, but should only be endorsers of the program, not prominent advocates.
- Local home improvement stores should be drawn in as partners because they are trusted sources for help and information.
- Building analysts are the ultimate source of reliable information.
- Messages need to convey the value (cost benefit) of the assessment because people are still risk averse – even if the dollar value is considered quite small.

## Introduction

---

Since 2010, the Washington State University (WSU) Energy Program's Community Energy Efficiency Program (CEEP) has been working with local programs to deliver home energy assessments and improvement resources in six areas around Washington state. The WSU Energy Program wants homeowners in Washington state to view energy efficiency as an important and integral part of everyday living.

The WSU Energy Program developed a research plan to better understand how homeowners feel about the importance of residential energy efficiency and the value of home energy improvements. The method chosen was to conduct focus groups to gather information that will be used to inform marketing campaigns for ongoing and future CEEP efforts at local and state-wide levels.

The audience for this focus group effort was homeowners. Homeowners are an ideal audience to study because they are numerous, easy to reach, and can make independent decisions about upgrades and changes to their property.

WSU Energy Program staff conducted two focus groups in each of the areas served by CEEP providers across the state. The six areas represented in the focus groups are:

- Spokane (Sustainable Works)
- Walla Walla (Sustainable Living Center)
- Whatcom County – Bellingham and Ferndale (Community Energy Challenge)
- King County – North Seattle (Sustainable Works)
- Thurston County – Lacey (Thurston Energy)
- Clark County – Vancouver (Clark County PUD)

One focus group in each area was composed of 12 people who had not participated in assessments and upgrades offered by their local CEEP provider. They are referred to here as *non-participants*. Non-participants were recruited from randomly selected listed phone numbers. Each focus group member was offered an incentive of \$50 cash for their participation.

The other focus group in each area was composed of 12 people who had participated in the local programs. They are referred to here as *participants*. Participants, chosen from the local CEEP provider's contact information, were further grouped as follows:

- Six of the focus group members participated **only in the home assessment**, where the local CEEP provider evaluated their home's energy use and developed a list of potential improvements that could reduce their energy use and related costs. These households may have moved ahead with making improvements to their homes, but they did not do so through their local CEEP provider.

- Six of the focus group members **participated in the home assessments *and* continued to work with their local CEEP provider to implement some or all of the recommended improvements.**

In counties where homeowners in major cities or metropolitan areas had been targeted by the local CEEP provider differently than homeowners in outlying areas, an even mix of people from each area was invited to attend. One participant per household was invited, and the groups were balanced to be half male and half female. These strategies assured diverse representation of perspectives in the discussions. Neutral, accessible locations were chosen for the focus group meetings.

The CEEP Sampling Strategy is provided here as Appendix A. The focus groups were run according to the facilitation guidelines provided as Appendix B.

## Focus Group Characteristics

Focus group members completed a short survey describing themselves before the discussion started (see Table 1). The survey results indicate that non-participants and participants were quite similar in the areas that were reported. Most focus group members lived in houses that were 40 or more years old. Over 60 percent had a minimum of a four-year college degree. Over 60 percent were currently married. Half were female (as result of recruiting parameters, not necessarily an indicator of interest) and almost 20 percent had children living at home. More than half were age 60 or older.

**Table 1. Self-Reported Focus Group Member Characteristics**

	Non-Participants (n=52)	Participants (n=57)	Total
<b>Number of focus group members attending</b>			
Spokane	10	10	20
Walla Walla	11	11	22
Whatcom	5	10	14
King	8	10	18
Thurston	8	9	17
Clark	10	7	17
<b>Age of home</b>			
Less than 10 years	8%	5%	7%
10-19 years	12%	11%	11%
20-29 years	14%	11%	12%
30-39 years	8%	12%	10%
40 years or more	59%	61%	60%
<b>Highest education of participant</b>			
High school or less	6%	5%	6%
Some college, no degree or certificate	14%	18%	16%
Two-year AA/AS degree or certificate	14%	14%	14%
Four-year college graduate	31%	33%	32%
Advanced college	35%	30%	32%
<b>Other personal characteristics</b>			
Currently married	69%	64%	66%
Female	43%	55%	50%
Children under the age of 18 living at home	18%	21%	19%
<b>Age of participant</b>			
Under 40	4%	7%	6%
40-49	8%	11%	9%
50-59	29%	36%	33%
60-69	37%	37%	37%
70 or older	22%	9%	15%

## Findings

---

Members of each focus group provided different perspectives about energy efficiency in the state, their community, and their homes. Through this effort, WSU Energy Program energy specialists came to a better understanding of:

- Reasoning and motivation involved in committing to a home energy assessment and making one or more of the recommended improvements, and
- Experiences, attitudes and beliefs of people who are not motivated to participate or have not heard of the local programs.

### Non-Participants

Members of the non-participant focus groups indicated that their experiences, attitudes and dispositions were similar to those of people that the local CEEP providers hope to reach through their marketing campaign. The fact that they took the time to be part of the focus group suggests they probably were interested in energy efficiency and home energy use at the time they were contacted about the focus group. People who are not at all interested in these topics would likely have refused the invitation to be a part of the focus group. It is also unlikely that they would pay attention to CEEP marketing efforts.

The discussion with non-participants covered four main topics:

- Importance of energy, home energy and energy efficiency – learning what participants think of these issues and if their outlook is mostly positive, negative, or neutral.
- Activities they have engaged in regarding home energy.
- Benefits they have experienced as a result of their activity (specifically, products they have purchased). If they have not made any changes, benefits they perceive from making changes.
- Organizations and people who they think should provide information about home energy efficiency (discussed in the next chapter).

The last two of these points were also discussed with program participants.

### Importance of Energy-Related Issues

Non-participants were prompted to share their thoughts regarding the importance of energy, home energy and energy efficiency issues. The questions were intentionally broad to explore the issues that participants were concerned about. The purpose was to learn what they typically think of when “energy” is the topic and whether their attitudes and experiences were predominantly positive, negative, or neutral.

When prompted to discuss anything that came to mind about energy, 18 non-participants mentioned energy efficiency. Another 13 mentioned alternative energy sources including hydro, solar, and wind power.

When asked about local energy issues, 38 percent of focus group members spoke to the topic. They often cited programs offered by their utility, tying these programs to their understanding

of “local energy.” Some members noticed local efforts, including low-energy demonstration homes, a high school energy conservation program and LED street lights installed in their town. When asked about energy at the state level, 23 percent responded, most commonly about wind energy and solar opportunities. Transportation, hydroelectric power, energy conservation, the aging electrical grid and dams were also mentioned.

Responses from the focus group members were predominantly positive, especially if talking about energy efficiency. The open questions generated a broad range of answers, from projects they were doing at their homes to the cost of their heating bills and alternative energy sources. Energy sources and utilities were the predominant topics.

When negative comments arose, they usually had to do with energy costs and discomfort that the participants experienced in their own homes, not with broader issues. Six participants mentioned discomfort, especially being cold, in their homes or other buildings. Energy costs were mentioned by 14 focus group members; of those, 12 had mostly negative impressions. The issues mentioned included:

- Frustration that rate increases offset use reduction and energy efficiency improvements
- Unpredictable fuel oil and utility rates
- Trouble understanding utility bills and charges
- Difficulty of keeping their costs down

Here is a sample of comments related to each of those themes:

*“I’m amazed at how much we try to cut down our energy use at home and how high our heating bill is.” [laughter from other members]*

– Vancouver

*“The costs just keep going up. You cut back, but they just increase the rates.”*

– Spokane

*“I’m happy to save energy but I’d like to see it reflected in my bill.”*

– Vancouver

*“I always wonder what the gas bill will be when it comes every month. I had an oil furnace before and that was really a shock when they filled the tank because you really never know.”*

– Whatcom

*“I think it’s a little mysterious. Just reading my energy bill – I think there’s a lot of stuff on there that I haven’t done a lot of personal research on.”*

– Lacey

Participants also expressed mistrust of products and labels, as exemplified by this comment:

*“I think that it’s maybe not as interesting as it is just the normal way business works. We tend to oversell the energy efficiency of stuff that’s on the market...this gadget will only use so much energy per year. Well, when you actually put it into practice, it uses half again that much. Maybe you would get those results if you use it the way they perhaps tested it, but the test isn’t very realistic.”*

– Whatcom

### Home Energy Activities

When asked to talk about home energy, almost all of the discussion involved descriptions of projects or improvements they had undertaken. Unlike the broader questions about local and state energy issues, these focus group members thought about bills and efficiency, not utilities, alternative energy sources, or politics. It is useful to note that “home energy” is not infused with political overtones among these focus group members, does not appear to carry with it tones of conservative or liberal ideology, and does not appear to be inflammatory.

**Discomfort** was a dominant theme when the facilitators brought the discussion around to home energy. When focus group members were asked about energy in their own homes, eight people complained of discomfort, including uneven heating of the house, dislike of the color of CFL and LED bulbs, and simply feeling cold. Ten talked about the cost of home energy and nine talked about the cost of improvements, mostly feeling they could not afford to make energy-saving improvements or that upfront costs were too high.

*“I think that most people are probably concerned about the bottom line – I know I am. I have an older house and it seems to be fairly cold even at 60 degrees when you turn the thermostat up. They tout insulation and it’s probably a good thing and I could undoubtedly stand more of it.”*

– Whatcom

Non-participants detailed many ways in which they felt thwarted in their attempts to fix discomfort problems or address cost issues. Many experienced similar frustrations about buying the wrong product, uncertainty about what to buy, feeling overwhelmed by research about products such as heat pumps or water heaters, or feeling skeptical of installers.

### A Focus on Products

Consider this series of missteps from a homeowner who was willing to invest in more efficient lighting for his home – a fairly common activity, but one that is complicated by a number of variables.

*“Interesting thing, the last two weeks I decided to switch out all my light bulbs to LED... so I ordered them online, got them, put them in, and can’t stand them. [Facilitator asks what it is about them he didn’t like.] They’re blue. I like the warm [colors]. ...Several hundred dollars later, I’ve got a pile of LED bulbs, that... I don’t know why they can’t put a filter over them. And I didn’t look to see that they had, you know, on Amazon they didn’t talk about color temperatures. So I guess I really didn’t know what I was ordering. And it’s the packaging –*

*when you open it, you can never put it back because you have to cut it open with a pen knife... Then I started to do some research a little bit about the LEDs and I found out that they're really hard on the environment to make, the manufacturing [process] is like ten times worse on the environment than a regular light bulb."*

– Walla Walla

Non-participants were very likely to talk about items they could purchase to save energy as opposed to improvements they could make to their homes. For example, the most common activity (mentioned by 22 focus group members) was to get a new furnace or change their fuel source. A close second was installing new windows (mentioned by 20). Adding insulation was mentioned by 14 and changing appliances, lights, and water heaters was mentioned by 15. Air sealing was mentioned by just four focus group members across the six groups.

Capital expenses seemed to be top of mind, such as a new furnace, windows, solar panels, and appliances. A total of 29 focus group members tried to make improvements to reduce their costs or discomfort, but few used rebates (only five across all of the non-participant focus groups). It may not be surprising, then, that so many were concerned about the cost of making improvements, such as installing solar panels, getting a new water heater, or buying new appliances. One member speculated that it might make more sense to buy a newer home than to put more money into an older home.

This focus on products rather than processes may be an indicator that non-participants are getting most of their information about saving energy from companies that have products to sell. Many also mentioned reading their utility's bill inserts and newsletters, so they gleaned information about energy efficiency there as well. A good portion (42 percent) said they had heard of or read something recently about home energy efficiency. Still, the homeowners did not often express a comprehensive understanding of the improvements their homes might need or the best changes to make to improve energy efficiency.

It is interesting that some focus group members saw switching to a different fuel source, especially wood, as a kind of energy savings. Perhaps this is because the cost does not show up on their utility bills, but it is unclear if they had figured in

**Number of non-participants who mentioned energy efficiency activities**

22	New furnace or change of fuel source (replace oil with wood or gas)
20	Windows
14	Insulation
9	Turning the heat down or using zone heating
7	Changing light bulbs
5	Replacing appliances
4	Air sealing
2	New water heaters

**Energy conservation was discussed among non-participants, but mostly as a source of frustration with others in the household.**

*"I have a natural gas furnace. My issue is when my grandchildren come over and they get cold – up goes the heat."*

– Seattle

*"Our bill plummeted when we finally got the kids to move out."*

– Vancouver

the cost of the wood. None mentioned the inconvenience of collecting or buying, storing, hauling, or burning wood for heat.

The most commonly mentioned conservation strategies were:

- Programming thermostats,
- Turning the heat down,
- Wearing sweaters and socks in the home, and
- Closing off areas that did not need to be heated.

Non-participants indicated that they were often uncertain about the payoff of conservation and efficiency measures. A simple thing like turning the heat down when they were out of the house was not viewed as being an effective way to save energy. One focus group member expressed concern that more energy would be needed to bring the house back up to temperature than if the thermostat had not been turned down. In contrast to focus group members who had participated in the program, non-participants had many unanswered questions about energy-related issues.

## **Participants**

Those who worked with local CEEP providers tended to be more cheerful at the focus groups than the non-participants. They were more engaged in the discussions, perhaps because they shared a common experience. They also seemed more knowledgeable about home energy, and their knowledge was fairly comprehensive. They behaved as if they felt empowered and seemed to know where to go to get the information and guidance they needed. Even if they had a bad experience with a CEEP provider, they seemed to have a clear view of the bigger picture. They networked very readily with each other and offered additional resources and information. The non-participant focus groups were more reserved and hesitant to offer ideas.

The discussion with participants covered four main topics:

- Energy use or energy efficiency at their own homes or something interesting or unusual about their home.
- Benefits they have experienced as a result of their activity.
- Barriers to program participation.
- Organizations and people who they think should provide information about home energy efficiency (discussed in the next chapter).

## **Energy-Related Features of Their Homes**

Program participants were asked to describe energy use or energy efficiency at their own homes or to describe something interesting or unusual about their home (different prompts were used by different facilitators). Nearly all participants launched into presentations about some aspect of their assessment or home energy efficiency projects – and nearly all with a positive viewpoint. These comments are fairly typical of the sentiments expressed in the participant focus groups.

*“I had some insulation done and I’m very, very happy with it because I can feel the difference without even looking at my bill. My house feels different – much more comfortable.”*

– Spokane

*“We have an envelope that is so tight and so warm... I was very impressed with the way they handled things, the way the local contractor took care of his end, their end, no hassles, no problems. It was a good experience for me.”*

– Walla Walla

*“The difference between the floor board electric and my heat pump, it’s amazing. I love it.”*

– Whatcom

### Benefits of Home Energy Activities

Some of the local CEEP providers offered bid, contracting, and quality control support to participants who made the recommended improvements through the program. Several participants mentioned the effectiveness of making changes to their homes. They appreciated having:

- A comprehensive list of potential improvements from their home assessment,
- Improvements prioritized by which would make the biggest difference, and
- A clear sense of the cost effectiveness of each improvement. Some local CEEP providers included an explicit estimate of the payback period before the homeowner would start to realize savings beyond the investment they made.

*“...The details provided in my home assessment made me realize why things weren’t going as well as I’d hoped... It made me target a few things I could do first that were feasible, not the whole thing because it was just a matter of budget. Some things that were able to be done were really helpful at first. It’s like ‘Oh, this I should have done when I replaced this.’ So now as I move forward I have a broader understanding of where I should be looking if I’m planning to change something or rearrange anything... it made me really rethink why I was doing some of the changes to the house.”*

– Spokane

Some mentioned paying less for energy, while others talked about the quality of the changes they made. Unlike non-participants in the focus groups, participants most often mentioned adding insulation (17). Only four mentioned changing out windows and doors, and five mentioned buying new water heaters. None mentioned getting a new furnace.

Only one participant expressed concern that the cost of making improvements was too high. It may be that price sensitivity was somewhat lower among the participants compared to non-participants, though this was not explicitly explored. Overall, participants highly valued the energy efficiency work they had done on their homes.

Some of the focus group members who worked with their local CEEP provider to have a home assessment done did not make the recommended improvements through the program. Many of these moved forward by doing the work themselves or hiring help outside of the program.

### **Participating in a Local CEEP**

To learn about what motivated participants to work with their local CEEP provider and any challenges they might have experienced as part of their initial contact with their CEEP, focus group members were asked:

- What motivated them to contact the program – particularly if it was triggered by an external prompt or by a personal event or experience?
- What kept them from signing up, if anything, after they heard about the program?
- What difficulties may have prevented them from continuing with the program?

### **Motivations**

The responses indicated that an even mix of proactive and reactive prompts led people to participate in their CEEP. The most common pathways into the program were word of mouth – things participants heard from other people (reactive) – or the participant having an existing problem with their home (proactive). Other common triggers included being unhappy about their home’s current energy use, either in terms of energy costs or savings from efficiency efforts. Some tried to make improvements on their own before contacting the program (15 percent).

Environmental concerns were also mentioned by some. Seeing flyers and other advertisements such as yard signs or utility bill inserts often provided people with the information they needed to sign up. The low cost of participation made a positive difference to several as well. The range of items that got people’s attention was varied and included tote bags, events, yard signs and direct mail.

### **Barriers**

When asked if anything got in the way once they decided to contact the program, the most common difficulty was scheduling (mentioned by 10 people). Making appointments with the assessor and finding times when they could be home from work to meet were identified as particular difficulties. Repeated calls and long waits were described as unpleasant.

Ten program participants also talked about the expense of the assessment and the recommendations. One expressed worry that the initial outlay would not be worthwhile, that they would not learn anything new, or that the recommendations would be too expensive to pursue. Other cost concerns included the rates that contractors would charge. Concerns about the costs of improvements and negative experiences in the past, particularly with contractors, were mentioned, but none were described as being significant impediments to signing up with the local CEEP provider.

Participants’ concerns about contractors – the quality of the work they would do or the reputation of the program and program contractors – are typified in the comment below.

*“I really don’t like to work with contractors – he spent a little time at a community college and knows which wrench is which. Who knows if he’s sober or where he spent the night last weekend. Is there a way to get better contractors? Either get them vetted or train them.”*

– Spokane

Finally, program complexity and problems with communication among participants and the programs or contractors were also a barrier to participation.

*“For me, I was unclear about who had the ball... I wanted to have the installation in the fall and I still haven’t finished. It’s partly me being busy. But part of it’s been unclear. We’ve been back and forth several times on the phone and with emails.”*

– Walla Walla

## Messaging and Benefits

---

Messages for the statewide CEEP campaign should focus on the key benefits identified by homeowners who successfully implemented energy efficiency work. The rank order of benefits was similar among the two sets of focus groups, although those who did not participate in the regional CEEPs placed more emphasis on the short-term rather than the long-term impacts of the work.

The two strongest benefits were lower cost of operating the household and increased comfort. These topics were discussed at more than twice the rate of other topics (see Table 2). Using less energy and doing something that protects the environment were also mentioned consistently, but not as prominently. Interestingly, program participants also noted the community benefits of having the work done – especially in terms of job creation – and the long-term benefit of improving their property value.

**Table 2. Benefits of Energy Efficiency Projects**

	<b>Non-Participants</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Total</b>
Lower cost/do more for same amount	18	7	25
More comfortable	15	5	20
Less energy used	5	3	8
Environmental benefits/good citizenship	5	3	8
Improved lighting	4	0	4
Less noise	3	1	4
Improved health/safety	3	1	4
Learned something	1	1	2
Improved property value	0	4	4
Builds community/jobs	0	5	5

For some, energy conservation and efficiency have social meaning in terms of leaving a legacy or “doing the right thing.” Some mentioned reducing their impacts on the planet. Although this was a minor thread, it was noted in each regional discussion. Alternative energy was also discussed in general terms, with a tone of interest, not contention.

“I wonder how it’s going to affect our children and our children’s children. I wonder what will be lacking and what will come as the future comes.”  
– Lacey

## Channels and Messengers

Both sets of focus groups were asked to identify organizations they considered leaders “in understanding home improvements that would save you energy.” Among the organizations discussed were utilities and public utility districts (PUDs), universities and other higher education institutions, state and local government agencies, and non-profits.

They were also asked to think about local, state, and national experts who they thought could be effective messengers of this information.

## Utilities and PUDs

Focus group members saw a role for utilities and PUDs as leaders in the programs, but there were caveats. While utilities and PUDs are considered knowledgeable experts, employees of utilities and PUDs are also driven by profit. Ultimately, focus group members did not think they could trust utilities or PUDs to have their best interests at heart. While these entities may be objective in noting which home improvements are effective or helpful in providing rebates, focus group members did not feel that utilities or PUDs could be trusted to help homeowners make unbiased decisions about their own homes.

“Trustworthiness is a scale. Probably at the top of the scale would be state universities and probably at the bottom of the scale would be for-profit utilities.”

– Seattle

## Universities and Higher Education

Concerns about ulterior motives and influences discouraged focus group members from trusting any channel or messenger *except* universities. In a few cases, members expressed concerns about research funding being a corrupting influence at universities, but far more prevalent was the sentiment that universities, the extension agent or educators were above reproach. Participants felt the motives of institutions of higher education were more transparent than those of other organizations, and that university staff were knowledgeable about the subject matter without being biased in their recommendations by profit-oriented motives.

“I think the state university has a big role. ...They are the most impartial of all ...they can play the role of just getting the best information, and this energy stuff – if you’ve gone through an assessment, it’s pretty technical and there’s new technology happening all the time. It seems like there’s a role for that sort of impartial, highly expert, research-oriented entity.”

– Seattle

## Government Agencies, Offices, and Officials

Government officials were also discussed. The U.S. Secretary of Energy, Washington state Governor Jay Inslee, and state and local government offices were suggested as potential seats of information about home energy. Focus group members did not reject government offices or spokespeople outright, but they did express some concern about the limitations of the role that government could play in energy efficiency programs. They also had reservations about the motives and influences of government officials as potential spokespeople.

*“The problem I have with a lot of state and federal government is the lobbyists – the special interests that influence what goes on in government so you don’t know whose voice you can trust.”*

– Vancouver

*“Pretty much in government, the higher you are, the less trustworthy you are.”*

– Spokane

*“...Everyone knows that he [Governor Jay Inslee] is a Democrat, and as soon as you hit that, it’s us versus them. You start going, ‘Well he’s a Democrat,’ so if you’re not [a Democrat too], you’re going to tune out anything he says. It might be right, it might be the best new thing to conserve energy, but you’re not going to hear it.”*

– Vancouver

## Non-Profits and Others

Many other organizations were mentioned by focus group members as leaders in understanding home improvements that save money.

- Ten mentioned local programs, such as the active weatherization programs or CEEP providers.
- Six mentioned Internet resources, including *Consumer Reports* and Angie’s List.
- Five mentioned auditors and building analysts.

## Leaning Toward Local Talent

Focus group members were also prompted with names of celebrities and political leaders to help them identify characteristics they thought would be a good fit for a spokesperson representing energy efficiency.

Most focus group members expressed dismay – even strong disagreement – with the idea of having celebrity spokespeople, such as a member of the Seahawks football team or billionaire developer Paul Allen, deliver messages about energy efficiency. Their comments emphasized the need for any spokesperson to have relevant expertise in home improvement, such as Tim Allen from the *Home Improvement* television program or hosts from *This Old House*.

Nearly every focus group ultimately built consensus on the idea of bringing in “someone like me.” (In one case, a focus group member suggested that he would be a good spokesperson.) Many had specific examples of local homeowners, engineers, or architects who had extensive knowledge of home improvements for energy efficiency. Contractors were considered experts but were thought to have potential conflicts of interest because they had something to gain from homeowners’ decisions. Home improvement store employees were suggested as helpful, but not necessarily unbiased, because their goal is to sell products and services.

Characteristics of effective spokespeople included a strong, pleasant personality; good communication skills; and the ability to come across as knowledgeable about what they are talking about. They need a “good face,” and ideally are also knowledgeable about local issues. Key characteristics included being straightforward, trustworthy, believable, open and understanding, and familiar with the challenges that homeowners deal with. Having some education is important, but personal experience is essential. They need to be an educator without being preachy or patronizing. They need to enjoy educating others, inspire people to take action, and thoroughly understand all the benefits of the ideas they are advocating.

## Conclusions

---

Homeowners who participated in CEEP felt like experts themselves due to their involvement with the program. They felt well supported and were aware of the resources they could use to help them move toward their energy conservation goals. They readily acknowledged the value in feeling knowledgeable.

Non-participants were active in improving their home energy efficiency and were often engaged and thoughtful about issues of home energy use even though they had declined to work with their local CEEP provider. Some members of these focus groups were very knowledgeable about home improvements, equipment, and technology that can make homes more energy efficient.

### **Non-participants clearly felt they were on their own**

The striking difference between those who participated in CEEP and those who did not was that non-participants clearly felt they were on their own. They often expressed frustration about the results of their energy conservation or home improvement efforts. Compared to program participants, non-participants felt less well supported and expressed that they were in the dark about resources. They did not know who to turn to for reliable, unbiased information about energy efficiency improvements. They expressed fear of being overcharged, the work being done incorrectly, or being sold something they did not need. They tend to be aware of the technology – windows, heat pumps, etc. – but they did not actively talk about workmanship and seemed unaware of the most effective, low-cost ways to make their homes more efficient.

### **Non-participants should be the audience for additional outreach**

Any CEEP outreach strategy directed toward this audience should:

- Emphasize the benefits of participating in a local program, including the empowerment that comes from having access to reliable and timely information.
- Focus on cost and comfort first, but also mention noise reduction, health and environmental benefits, and using less energy.

### **People want to see people like themselves as spokespersons**

Local talent is trusted. People wanted to see “real” people as spokespersons, people like themselves who know first-hand where the audience is coming from and who are experts at answering questions. Common and – ideally – regionally tailored messages should be developed for regional spokespeople to share.

Utilities and PUDs are important backers of energy efficiency work, but may be viewed with some distrust and frustration. Their expertise in energy is clear, and they are valued as conduits of some of the information, but their ulterior motives are suspect. Transparency about their sponsorship of the programs is critical, but participants have to believe there is no relationship between rate increases, profitability of the work, and CEEP.

## **Universities were the clear choice as unbiased sources of information**

While a few focus group members noted that higher education can be somewhat political, universities were viewed as the least suspicious of all entities that were discussed for providing information about home energy efficiency and conservation. Locating home energy efficiency information and referrals in a centralized place – particularly if the entity is known for doing community outreach and education, such as extension agents – provides legitimacy to local programs and balances the utility’s promotions. Endorsements from higher education are seen as validation that the practices recommended were not influenced by other goals.

Local and state government offices are also needed for legitimacy, but should only be endorsers of the program, not prominent advocates.

Local home improvement stores should be drawn in as partners. They are trusted sources for help and information for many people. Stores should direct people to the local CEEP providers for home assessments, motivated by the desire for their customers to feel the work they did was effective. If customers are treating a problem without adequate information, such as adding insulation or replacing windows without investigating air sealing, they will be less happy with the cost and effort of making the improvements. It makes the stores look smart to refer them to specialists such as building analysts.

## **Building analysts are the ultimate source of reliable information**

Once building analysts provide recommendations tailored for each customer, CEEP auditors and advisors help participants prioritize what to do first and assess the cost-benefit/payback period.

## **Final thoughts on future messaging**

Messages need to convey the value (cost benefit) of the assessment because people are still risk averse – even if the dollar value is considered quite small. It may be beneficial to talk about surprise discoveries from people who thought they knew what their homes needed.

Regional variation between eastern and western Washington were minimal, with the exception that pro-environmental attitudes were more commonly expressed in the Seattle area. Clark County participants also deserve careful attention because they described themselves as “Northwest Oregon” and were much more attuned to Oregon politics, non-profits, and news than they were to Washington-based information. They were also fans of their PUD, which is the seat of their home energy efficiency program (unusual among the WSU Energy Program CEEPs). The Clark County region may present unique opportunities for implementing additional outreach.

## Appendix A: CEEP Sampling Strategy

---

Area in Washington State	Program Participants		Listed Household (non-participants)
	Assessments	Measures	
<b>Walla Walla County</b>	6	6	12
<b>Spokane County</b>	6	6	12
<b>Clark County</b>	6	6	12
<b>Thurston County</b>			
Olympia, Lacey, Tumwater	3	3	6
Other Thurston	3	3	6
<b>King County</b>			
Seattle	3	3	6
Non-Seattle	3	3	6
<b>Whatcom County</b>			
Bellingham	3	3	6
Outside Bellingham	3	3	6

## Appendix B: Statewide Focus Group Facilitation Guide

---

### Overview (5-10 minutes)

1. As participants arrive, they will fill out nametags, first name only. Alternatively, have table tents with their nametags ready for them. A short survey of basic characteristics (age, sex, age of home, awareness of home energy assessments, years in the home, presence of children in the home, etc.) will be administered.
2. Facilitator will introduce self and the note taker and observer(s); note where the restrooms are; and invite people to enjoy the refreshments during the discussion.
3. Facilitator will describe the purpose of the meeting:  
*To better understand what homeowners like you think about energy and energy efficiency. Your discussion will help us design outreach to better inform people about energy and energy efficiency in Washington state.*
4. Facilitator defines a focus group and explains how the group will proceed:  
*A focus group is a discussion among people who share some common interest or characteristics (in this case, homeowners who have had an energy assessment), brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific topic.*
  - *I will introduce questions for you to consider and would like to hear from all participants. The discussion will last for about an hour and a half and will be recorded for reference.*
  - *We will use first names in our discussion and no names will be used in any reports. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any time so you can make a comment, just let me know.*

#### Ground rules:

- *Stay on-topic*
- *Only one person speaks at a time*
- *Give everyone a chance to contribute*
- *Minimize or eliminate side conversations*
- *Treat everyone with respect (do not criticize what others have to say)*
- *Turn off your cell phones and put them away*

*At the end of the discussion, we will have you sign for your check.  
Do you have any questions before we begin?*

### Discussion Questions (1.25 hours)