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Programs available for energy cuts

February 11, 2011 - By JOHANNA BOYLE Journal Ishpeming Bureau

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MARQUETTE - If you buy electricity or natural gas from a utility company, you might have noticed the inclusion of an energy optimization charge on their monthly bills. What people might not realize is that charge is there to provide rebate and incentive programs to help reduce their energy usage.

Mandated by Public Act 295 in 2009, the charge collects funds in a pool to be used to help Michigan residents upgrade to more energy efficient appliances or improve the energy rating of their home. Residents just have to take advantage of the programs available, depending on their utility provider.

Semco Energy, for example, is participating in a Home Performance Program through its participation in Efficiency United, a cooperative of Michigan utilities to provide the services funded by the energy optimization charge.

"Rarely does the homeowner even realize that this is even on their bill," said Gary Horwood of Home Evaluation Services in Harvey, which provides the energy assessment or audit required to qualify for the Home Performance Program.

The program provides a rebate not just for the energy audit, but up to \$2,750 to help homeowners recoup the costs of upgrading their home if it is found the improvements improved efficiency by 15 percent.

"That can be mechanical equipment, that can be air sealing and doors," said Kerry Noble, also of HES. "Unlike a tax credit, the goal of this program is to reduce gas usage in customers' homes."

The Home Performance Program, however, starts with an audit or assessment of a home's energy usage, which must be carried out by a certified auditor, like Noble or Horwood. By testing the home for efficiency both before the repairs and after allows homeowners and program administrators to determine how much of an impact the improvements made in terms of energy use.

If a Semco customer decides to participate in the performance program, auditors from companies like HES make two visits to the home for data collection.

"We interview the homeowners. We talk to them about their house," Horwood said. "We have to physically measure the whole house."

That measuring includes a door blower test to check to see how air tight the home is and check for leaks.

Then that data is put into a computer program that shows how the home's energy costs are broken down and where investments could be made to reduce those costs.

From that information, the homeowner can decide whether or not to proceed with the improvements and if they would be cost effective.

The program provides for incentives that reduce the total audit fee of \$550 to \$250 out of pocket expense for the homeowner, with improvements covered by up to 50 percent, depending on how much energy is saved.

To learn more about efficiency programs covered by the energy optimization charge, visit www.encyunitied.com and click on your utility provider. To contact HES to learn more about the energy audit process, visit www.hesmq.com or call 906-249-3333.

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