

Experts share heat-saving tips

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BATH — Tuesday may have been one of the summer's hottest days, but during a weatherization forum in Bath, the focus was squarely on the colder days ahead.

Nonprofit leaders and energy experts offered lessons learned from an ambitious local effort to make low income homes more heat and energy efficient in advance of last winter. Absorbing the advice were more than 60 people from 10 Maine counties. Some workshop attendees even ventured across state lines.

Forum organizers set a goal of educating attendees about some science and strategies of weatherization — and to equip the visiting community leaders with a list of best practices as they go back home and attempt to organize their own volunteer efforts.

The United Way of Mid Coast Maine hosted the afternoon event at the organization's Wing Farm Parkway location. Among the forum speakers were Barbara Reinertsen, executive director of the local United Way branch, Downeast Energy Customer Service Manager Bill Brilliant, Habitat for Humanity/7 Rivers Maine Executive Director Tara Hill and West Bath resident Charles Wing, who was introduced as a "nationally renowned energy expert" and "the glue who kept the project together."

The forum centered on what Wing described as "the low-hanging fruit" of weatherization. Leading into the winter of 2008-09, a team led in part by Brilliant, Wing and Hill set out to organize an army of volunteers who could hand-make simple storm windows and weatherize homes by installing new double-glazed window frames, replacing old light bulbs with more efficient styles and sealing air leaks.

According to information provided at the forum, 166 volunteers made 345 storm windows and weatherized 76 homes during the effort. The work on those homes should save each homeowner approximately \$376 per year, according to organizers.

In total, the collaborative spent \$8,814 on materials and staff resources, which volunteers transformed into an estimated \$32,475 in annual savings for the homeowners.

Margaret Wilson, chairwoman of the United Way's Basic Needs Council and a volunteer coordinator for the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore operation, said the groups hope to weatherize 100 homes in the Mid-coast region before this coming winter.

The project organizers aimed to determine "what could minimally trained volunteers do that is not expensive, but offers the biggest payback in terms of benefits for a homeowner," Maria Hinteregger of the United Way of Mid Coast Maine said Tuesday.

Wing told attendees at Tuesday's forum that homes built before 1980 waste about 50

percent of their heat, on average. He said heat losses could be linked in part to 39 "known heat leaks" in various parts of a given structure.

"If you take a reasonably intelligent person and give them about three or four hours of classroom time, get them to really understand what heat is, how it moves and how it reacts, that person can go back to their home and cut out approximately half of that 50 percent heat loss," Wing said.

But organizing hundreds of volunteers to do even basic home improvement tasks in dozens of strangers' homes can be a daunting task. Having been through the process last winter, local leaders offered forum visitors some timely "Do's and Don'ts" to take home with them.

Wilson urged attendees to contain any ambitious project's time frame to a brisk three months, with volunteers and homeowners alike tied to firm work dates.

"Capture the energy of the folks who are interested in doing this when the first wisps of cool show up in September, people start looking at their heating budgets and saying, 'If I can't deal with this without a little help, what about my neighbors?'" she said.

Wilson told forum audience members to align with community groups that can get word of the project out to homeowners who need the help most, and to ensure there's a liability plan in place to cover injuries suffered by volunteers while working to weatherize another household.

In implementing some of those lessons learned, Hill said the local weatherization effort will begin in August and September with the registration of households in need and the recruitment and training of volunteers. As soon as volunteers are trained, Hill said, they'll form teams and head out into the community to perform the work, with the entire 100 home goal slated for completion by the end of October.

She also said volunteers will be sent into the homes with resource lists and additional information if the homeowners need more weatherization help than volunteers are trained to provide.

Catharine Arnold, an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America) coordinator, offered attendees some tips on where to find and retain volunteers for their local projects. Arnold listed church groups, trade associations and student programs among places to seek organized volunteer help.

Tuesday's forum was capped by brief presentations from people involved in energy efficiency projects in other communities. Among them was Justin Holmes of the Midcoast Economic Development District, who discussed efforts involving several local and state groups to develop a Bath Regional Career and Technical Center program devoted to energy efficient building trades practices.