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Poster Title: Examining an Effective Model to Impact Grassroots Knowledge and Behavior Regarding Energy Usage.

Abstract: This presentation examines the effectiveness of a consumer education strategy based on community organizing methods. The Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation (ISEIF), through its consumer education initiatives, has been seeking "to help consumers understand and harness the benefits of a more modern, efficient electrical grid." The presenters are the principal investigator of the research project examining the impact of the education and a lead outreach staff in this consumer education effort. Loyola University Center for Urban Research and Learning and Heartland Social IMPACT Research Center, conducted preliminary descriptive research to help ISEIF understand the impact of their grantees' public education on consumer knowledge, behavior, and sharing information with others. Researchers collaborated with ISEIF's grantees to recruit attendees at nine public education outreach events. The grantees, the Citizens Utility Board (CUB), Elevate Energy and Faith in Place, conduct three types of events: utility bill clinics, presentations to community groups, and house parties. Researchers collected data from 48 participants at two points in time. At time one, focus groups were conducted, and at time two, phone interviews. The focus groups and interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish. This preliminary research found that individuals retained information about reducing energy consumption over time, acted upon some of that information, and to a large extent, shared that information within their family and community networks. Also, the findings seem to suggest people are more likely to retain information and/or take action when they can see how it directly benefits them. Hence more intimate settings with one-one-one interactions (utility bill clinics) and smaller groups (house parties/presentations) see better results in information retention and program participation. Strategies for saving energy and money are often related and linked to smart grid technology in ways that aren't apparent to the average utility customer. Understanding an individual's relationship to their energy at home allows for more tailored solutions for energy/money saving tips. Investment in grassroots outreach and education allows organizations like the ISEIF grantees to become trusted voices in communities on energy related topics. This model relies on ongoing strategic engagement with local and statewide elected officials, community leaders and other grassroots organizations in metropolitan and rural communities. Continuing to explore the need to support community-based outreach strategies is critical to ensuring that the benefits of smart grid technology, energy efficiency, and renewable energy are accessible to everyone no matter where they happen live