

Kara Rodgers-Marshall, Eversource Energy

Title: Using Energy Affordability Analysis to Drive Participation in Low Income Programs

Abstract: Over 70 million low and moderate income (LMI) Americans struggle to pay their electricity bills each year. Low-income households suffer a disproportionate energy burden, defined as the percentage of gross household income spent on energy costs. The lack of available budget after energy costs leads to other issues such as difficulty paying for groceries, medical bills and other necessities. Eversource recognizes the needs of its LMI customers and has a long and successful history of helping low income customers weatherize their homes working with local Community Action Program (CAP) agencies. Over the past three years, we've reached over 50,000 homes. Our partners report that it is becoming challenging to find more customers to help, so we need to see if there are customers we have overlooked. We generally market to customers who have self-identified as needing help: those who have applied for utility assistance, fuel assistance or gone to food banks. Our partners also engage in outreach at the neighborhood level in distressed census tracts. We want make our marketing proactive, and to do this we will need to improve our ability to identify individual customers who need help no matter where they live. Finding these customers is the first step towards improved outreach. Eversource and Oracle Utilities-Opower partnered to develop a first-of-its-kind analytical approach to characterize communities in need and target the customers who need help. While most experts have relied solely on energy burden as a singular metric to characterize need, the Eversource-Opower team intends to employ a data-driven methodology that will leverage individual energy consumption, available customer demographic data, third party data and innovative, open source data sets. The resultant curated portfolio of metrics will move beyond burden to illuminate specific characteristics of target communities and create nuanced programs that are specific to the socio-economic needs of a particular area. For example, the generally accepted 6% energy burden obscures the fact that 1 in 4 low income renters pay over 70% on housing costs and thus may not have any monies available for energy no matter how low the burden threshold. Preliminary results indicate that by combining the portfolio of metrics, we can find customers who slip through the cracks when we market based on income or neighborhood alone.

The results of the analysis the analysis will allow Eversource to better target direct marketing and general awareness efforts to draw more customers into our LMI programs. Additionally, a deeper understanding of customer needs should help us better quantify the non-energy benefits of energy efficiency.

Representatives from Eversource and Oracle will present on the results of the analysis and share results of outreach conducted so far.