Savings in the House

In the fall of 2013, the City of Knoxville launched the Smarter Cities Partnership, a group of organizations thinking together about how to make energy efficiency services more available to lower-income families. The Partnership observed that local energy efficiency education wasn’t well coordinated and had limited reach, especially for low-income people. Many local partners had created energy efficiency “tip sheets,” but often these handouts were too complicated for the average reader, or suggested expensive upgrades that were unaffordable.

The Partnership sought to do energy efficiency education differently, in a way that more directly engaged residents and empowered them to be more in control of their utility bills. Erin Gill, the City of Knoxville Sustainability Director, explains, “We wanted to coordinate a range of different education efforts, not just brochures but also person-to-person learning opportunities that help residents feel knowledgeable and capable of saving energy.” The result, funded through Partners for Places (P4P), was the “Savings in the House” campaign, which uses different education and engagement approaches to motivate energy efficient behavior among audiences not reached by traditional energy efficiency education.

The United Way and the East Tennessee Foundation collaborated with the “Savings in the House” campaign to provide a 3:1 match for a $30,000 P4P grant, which supported the development and distribution of a new campaign brand, educational brochures, and in-person workshop teaching tools that may be used not just by the city, but by any local partner. Securing funding for “Savings in the House” to come online soon after the Smarter Cities Partnership launched was key in helping the Partnership generate positive momentum.

The city and the philanthropic partners agree one of the greatest innovations of “Savings in the House” was the partnership developed with a grassroots organization, Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development (SEEED), to engage with residents through door-to-door outreach. SEEED, which provides career-readiness training to at-risk youth in low-income communities, trained youth ambassadors to teach residents about energy efficiency tips and gather community feedback. As a trusted grassroots partner, SEEED also hosted focus groups to help inform how the campaign could best respond to the needs of residents. Working with SEEED not only resulted in the effective delivery of energy education, but also paved the way for a new type of outreach model to help the city better engage with lower-income residents and communities of color. According to Gill, “With a different messenger you can have a different conversation than you might have with the city. It’s often easier for someone to have an authentic conversation with a neighbor or friend’s kid than with a city employee.”

“As Sustainability Director, I had collaborated in the past with philanthropic partners to explore broad challenges in our community. P4P was the impetus to deepen this relationship by working together on a specific, tangible project that directly advanced shared goals.” — Erin Gill, Sustainability Director, City of Knoxville

The city now seeks to replicate the model to meet other sustainability outreach needs. According to Anna Wiggins, from the East Tennessee Foundation, “It’s opening citizens up to the idea that the city and utilities can be more approachable. It is improving relationships in the community and creating examples of alternative ways to structure things.”

Partners for Places is a successful matching grant program that improves U.S. and Canadian communities by building partnerships between local government sustainability leaders and place-based foundations. National funders invest in local projects developed through these partnerships to promote a healthy environment, a strong economy, and well-being for all residents. Through these investments, Partners for Places fosters long-term relationships that make our urban areas more prosperous, livable, and vibrant. For more information, please visit fundersnetwork.org.