Establish a clear system and process for ensuring quality work

A residential energy efficiency program's success is dependent on the quality of work that contractors conduct in customers' homes. Indeed, an in-depth **examination** [1] of selected program strategies found that effective quality assurance and quality control programs provided a foundation for quality upgrades and were achieved through numerous program design and implementation decisions and follow-through. Many Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners and Home Performance with ENERGY STAR Sponsors found that tiered and onsite quality assurance strategies, in addition to file reviews of upgrades reported to the program, worked well. Most programs use a tiered approach, in which a program inspects the first several upgrades completed by a new contractor and then inspects a specified percentage of subsequent projects. Onsite quality assurance is a useful strategy, both as a way of gathering feedback and as a training opportunity.

Programs conduct a broad range of verifications, including checking contractors' certifications regularly, implementing a mechanism to re-check certifications, and verifying home performance professional safety skills (e.g., combustion training). In addition to inspections and feedback, some program also identified standards for ensuring quality work, including standards for technical work, for diagnostic tools and installed equipment, and for professionalism and customer service. Setting those expectations helped allow contractors to understand what was expected of them and better enabled them to help programs be successful from the beginning.

- In New York, **NYSERDA** [2] uses a tiered approach for quality assurance. Inspection rates vary based on the contractor's status in the program (see **NYSERDA's QA Procedures** [3]). The program inspects the first three projects that all contractors complete. After these initial projects, the program inspects 15% of a contractor's completed projects, and at least one project annually. Customers may also request that field inspections be conducted within one year of the contractor's work. If contractors have repeated QA/QC issues, NYSERDA increases the field inspection sampling rate, generally to 50% or more. If problems persist and are not resolved, NYSERDA sometimes suspends contractors from the program according to its QA procedures.
- The **RePower program** [4] on Bainbridge Island, Washington, created a standardized process for quality control inspections. Energy upgrades completed under the RePower program could be randomly selected for quality control inspections, and were rated "Pass," "Needs Minor Corrective Action," or "Needs Major Corrective Action" based on the current **RePower *Weatherization Specifications Manual*** [5]. If problems were found to require corrective action, contractors were required to perform the corrective actions at no additional cost to the customer. Repeated occurrences of an individual problem or serious problems resulted in a performance improvement plan or suspension from the RePower program. The program randomly selected 10% of their rebate applications for quality control inspection, and RePower staff worked to schedule an appointment with the homeowner within one week of selection.
- The **NeighborWorks of Western Vermont program** [6] in Rutland County, Vermont, designed a quality assurance approach as a means to gather feedback and incentivize improvement. The program produced monthly contractor performance reports that compared contractor conversion rates, and then provided incentives to top performers. This approach was a productivity driver that encouraged contractors to make improvements to their business practices. During monthly one-on-one meetings, the program checked on each contractor's client status list, made sure that no customers fell through the cracks, and gathered contractor feedback during the conversation. The program also set a timeline by which contractors must submit assessment reports to homeowners, with penalties in place for late reports. Using this approach, wait times dropped from four months to three weeks. See the **Concierge Programs for Contractors webinar** [7] for more information. This approach has given contractors and the program the opportunity to improve over time.
- The **Town of University Park, Maryland's STEP-UP program** [8] worked to address variability in the quality of work that its contractors provided. The program approached this problem in two ways. First, STEP-UP issued a request for proposals for contractors that met specific performance benchmarks. From those proposals, the program then selected contractors with whom they had worked well in the past and began listing them as "preferred" contractors on their website. Ninety-nine percent of customers began selecting contractors from this list. Second, the program employed an energy coach for participating homeowners, to provide regular quality assurance of contractors' work. The coach provided intermittent inspections at customers' request, when they had concerns or when they chose to assist the program by allowing them to check on the contractors' performance. The energy coach reviewed work proposals for scope and price; as a result, customers were reassured that they were getting the work they needed at a reasonable market price and therefore were getting fair value. By playing these roles, the coach gave customers assurance that they were receiving high value work from contractors and incentivized contractors to do quality work.

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Links

[1] http://energy.gov/eere/better-buildings-neighborhood-program/accomplishments#reports
[2] http://www.nyserda.ny.gov/
[3] http://hpwescontractorsupport.com/program-documents-2/2014-2015-contractor-resource-manual/section-11-quality-assurance-qa/
[4] http://www1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/betterbuildings/neighborhoods/bainbridge_profile.html
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