

Program Design & Customer Experience – Develop Resources

Description

Once you have [designed your program](#) and developed an [implementation plan](#), you will need to acquire or create program resources—from program staff to forms for customers to fill out. These resources will allow you to undertake the day-to-day operation and management of the program.

Aim to develop and test these resources before you launch the program, and maintain flexibility to develop others as the need arises. You will inevitably refine them over time as you [assess and improve](#) your program.

Specific resources will vary by program, which you will have identified in your implementation plans. This handbook focuses on common program resources, describing them as a series of steps that may be appropriate for you:

- **Decide who will implement the program**, who may manage and operate some or all aspects of a program
- **Hire and train a program team**, including defining roles and responsibilities and training
- **Develop project tracking systems** for managing the service delivery process among programs, customers, and contractors and generating data for ongoing program assessment and improvement
- **Develop customer care resources**, such as call centers, websites, and related systems to address customer questions and complaints
- **Develop customer intake process templates and forms** for sharing information among programs, customers, and contractors
- **Develop financial processing systems for incentives**, which track the distribution of rebates and other forms of financial incentives.

In addition to developing these central program resources, you will need to develop specific resources for [marketing and outreach](#), [financing](#), [contractor engagement & workforce development](#), and [evaluation & data collection](#). Your program design and management team will need to assess and coordinate these resources across the program for consistency.

Program Design & Customer Experience

Stages:

[Overview](#)

1. [Assess the Market](#)
2. [Set Goals & Objectives](#)
3. [Identify Partners](#)
4. [Make Design Decisions](#)
5. [Develop Implementation Plans](#)
6. [Develop Evaluation Plans](#)
7. **Develop Resources**
8. [Deliver Program](#)
9. [Assess & Improve Processes](#)
10. [Communicate Impacts](#)

Find related information across other program components:

- **Market Position & Business Model – Develop Resources**
Identify and develop needed resources to position your organization in the market and maintain a viable business model.
- **Marketing & Outreach – Develop Resources**
Create your program's branding guidelines and materials to elevate program visibility and support your marketing and outreach efforts.
- **Financing – Develop Resources**
Develop the procurement, outreach, and loan support resources required to perform your financing activities.
- **Contractor Engagement & Workforce Development – Develop Resources**
Develop workforce and contractor engagement procedures, forms, and materials

Step-by-Step

There are several steps to developing resources that support the operation and management of your program.

Decide who will implement the program

This step describes different organizational arrangements for managing and operating a program and the advantages and disadvantages of hiring program implementers versus conducting these activities in-house. If hiring program implementers is the right approach for your program, this step describes key considerations for doing so.

Residential energy efficiency programs typically use one of three institutional arrangements for implementing programs:

- Using in-house staff to carry out all program components (rather than contracting with program implementers).
- Contracting with one or more program implementers to run a specific component of a program (e.g., call center). In this case, other functions may be performed by program staff or they might be performed by other contracted program implementers.
- Contracting with a program implementer to run all components of a program. In this case, program staff members are involved primarily in contract management, making sure that the program implementer adheres to the terms of their agreement.

There is no best approach. As described below, there are advantages and disadvantages to each arrangement that you should consider in light of your program's [goals and objectives](#).

Advantages & Disadvantages of Different Organizational Approaches for Program Management & Operations

OBJECTIVE	DISADVANTAGES	EXAMPLES
Approach: Using in-house staff to carry out all program components		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can leverage existing local connections to customers and partners (or establish new ones more quickly) • Creates local jobs • Clear accountability • Does not require a procurement process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be difficult to hire necessary expertise and may take time to develop through training and experience • May take time to develop important industry connections outside the local program • Program start-up may be slower • May be difficult to scale to program needs (e.g., hiring takes time, layoffs may be difficult) • Tracking system and other tools need to be purchased or developed • Organization holds all risk for failure to perform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Austin Energy, a utility, ran all aspects of its Clean Energy Accelerator residential energy efficiency program with in-house staff • CPS Energy, the municipal electric utility in San Antonio, Texas, also carried out all program components for CPS Energy Savers • Neighborworks of Western Vermont, a nonprofit housing organization focused on sustainable home ownership, implemented all aspects of the H.E.A.T. Squad program in Rutland County, Vermont • The Small Town Energy Program in University Park, MD, and Energize New York in Bedford, NY—both small programs in small towns—ran their programs with in-house staff
Approach: Contracting with one or more program implementers to run a specific component of a program		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May provide higher level of component-specific expertise • Often provides important industry connections • Often allows for faster program start-up • Often easier to scale to program needs (e.g., ramping up or down) • Contracts can be tied to performance, which reduces risk for contracting organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability may not be clear if roles and responsibilities are not clearly articulated in contracts • Requires more attention to communication and coordination among implementing organizations • May lack pre-existing local connections and knowledge (e.g., about key stakeholders, community concerns) • May be harder to establish enduring local connections • May not create local jobs • Requires budget for contracting • Requires a procurement process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Power Works in Seattle hired a local consulting firm to run its call center and administrative aspects of the program • EnergySmart in Boulder County, Colorado, hired a private customer engagement firm to run its energy advisor program and call center
Approach: Contracting with a program implementer to run all components of a program		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediately brings expertise and resources (e.g. data systems, training curriculum) • Often provides important industry connections • Often allows for faster program start-up • Often easier to adjust size of staff and resources to program needs (e.g., through hiring or allocation of staff) • Contracts can be tied to performance, which reduces risk for contracting organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May lack pre-existing local connections and knowledge (e.g., about key stakeholders, community concerns) • May be harder to establish enduring local connections • May not create local jobs • Requires budget for contracting • Requires a procurement process • Provides less day-to-day control over program operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RePower Kitsap hired a third-party program implementer to run its program in Washington State • The City of Chicago hired a non-profit organization to implement Energy Impact Illinois; the non-profit then contracted with several partners to implement component of the program

Source: U.S. Department of Energy, 2014.

If you decide to contract with program implementers for all or part of your program operation, competitive solicitations can take several different forms suited to your needs:

- Request for information (RFI)—designed to solicit information to help inform the design of a subsequent initiative or procurement process

- Request for qualifications (RFQ)—designed to identify and pre-qualify program implementers who are eligible to perform certain work, and who may or may not receive contracts for specific funding as needed in the future
- Request for proposals (RFP)—designed to pick one or more program implementers to be awarded contracts based on factors such as qualifications and cost.

For example, [Enhabit](#) (formerly known as Clean Energy Works Portland) issued an [RFP](#) for program administration support to provide, among other services:

- Recruitment of 100 homes with signed loans into the Enhabit pilot
- Cost-efficient delivery of up to 143 Home Performance with ENERGY STAR home energy assessments
- Cost-efficient delivery of various energy efficiency packages to 100 homes (specifically, weatherization, heating and hot water system upgrades).

The process for RFPs and other competitive solicitations typically consists of:

1. A public posting of a specific request, including information about the scoring or decision-making criteria for evaluating the best responses, usually at least a month or two before the due date
2. The submittal of responses to that request in a prescribed format, by a specific due date
3. A review process that evaluates the responses based on specified criteria
4. Acceptance of one or more responses
5. Negotiations with accepted responders
6. One or more contract awards, though many times programs include a provision allowing them to reject any or all responders they deem unqualified.

What Are You Looking For When You Issue an RFP?

How can you be sure that the RFP you issue will get you qualified bids? One of the most important aspects of writing a good RFP is making sure that you know what you are looking for, and that you describe that accurately in the RFP. If you aren't sure about what you want, then potential bidders will have to draft their proposals based on what they think you should want—and that might be something that will not help you meet your goals. To be clear in your RFP, you should:

- Include background information that explains the intent, goals, and objectives of your program
- Describe the specific activities or tasks that you will ask the contractor to perform, and the quantity or level of effort expected for each task
- Provide details about the expected length of the contract, and if known, the realistic prospects for renewal
- If possible, include some level of budget guidance about the anticipated value of the contract so that you don't get proposals that are grossly in excess of your program budget.

When you are selecting a program implementer who will be awarded a contract for tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of work—or more—every step in the solicitation process is important. You want to run a solicitation that is widely seen as fair and transparent and that will result in the best-suited contractor being selected. To do this, you must be crystal-clear about what you are looking for and the criteria you will use to score responses.

You must also run a review process that reduces the chance of bias—perhaps by using the average score of several reviewers, or by selecting reviewers from a diverse pool of staff and stakeholders, or even by removing company names from response packets that the reviewers will base their scoring on.

Follow the Rules

If you decide to contract with program implementers for all or part of your program operation, follow procurement guidelines and requirements that are associated with your organization, your funding source, and any applicable laws. Failure to follow procurement requirements can put your funding at risk or subject you to legal challenge. While less extreme, the negative publicity associated with even the hint of an improper contract award process can severely damage your program's image. It can also delay your program launch.

Contracted program implementers are typically identified and awarded contracts either through a competitive solicitation or through a sole-sourcing arrangement. While sole-sourcing a contract can be faster and easier, almost any funder or organization will have limitations on the dollar value of contracts that can be sole-sourced. If you are considering a sole-source solicitation, be sure that you have a detailed understanding of these limitations, and of any contract approval protocols before you make promises to any program implementers. Make sure that sole-sourcing a contract will lead to the best possible program implementer for your program. Competitive solicitations are designed to identify the most qualified and most affordable program implementers—exactly who you want to work with to ensure your program's success.

Once you have selected and hired a program implementer, you need to make sure you clearly communicate and document what you expect. Program implementers need to be fully informed of—and committed to—your understanding of the market, program goals and objectives, partners, and design. This is also a key opportunity for your program to benefit from the experience of the program implementer and get feedback on all aspects of your program before you launch.

Hire and train a program team

Before you launch the program, you will need to implement the staffing plan described in your [implementation plan](#). Your implementation plan should include job descriptions for all staff positions, including areas of responsibility, key tasks, and any relevant certifications or other requirements for the position. This includes coordinating hiring and integrating staff for specific program components, including [marketing and outreach](#), [financing](#), [contractor engagement & workforce development](#), and [evaluation & data collection](#). According to a comprehensive [evaluation](#) of over 140 programs across the country, having a highly experienced team members with fifteen or more years' experiences seems to contribute to program success.

After hiring staff, you will need to make sure that you have adequate orientation and training that:

- Establishes clear roles and responsibilities
- Ensures appropriate knowledge of the program delivery process and technical knowledge appropriate to the position
- Ensures consistent communication and messaging about the program vision, mission, and value proposition for customers.

Training tip: Get New Staff Connected to Better Buildings Residential Resources

Consider requiring new staff members to review sections of the Better Buildings Residential Program Solutions Center that relate to their job responsibilities. If your organization is a member of the [Better Buildings Residential Network](#), make sure new staff get invitations to peer exchange calls and register for the e-newsletter.

Develop project tracking systems

There are many moving parts to a residential energy efficiency program, and project tracking systems can help you manage this complexity. These systems are a core resource for programs to track, manage, and report on the status of all projects. They are also important for generating data used for ongoing [program assessment and improvement](#). Many programs choose to use systems that integrate information from a customer's first contact with the program to final inspection and reporting of results. These systems allow programs to determine where customers are at any stage of the upgrade process to provide high-quality customer service and assess opportunities for improving program performance.

You can either adopt and customize a commercially available system or create (or adapt) your own system. There are several commercially available project tracking systems that programs can purchase and customize, and you are encouraged to seek out options from a range of private vendors. To understand what type of system is most appropriate for your program, you should follow the sub-steps below.

Whatever system you choose, your program should train staff and partners (e.g., contractors) using the system. You should also assign clear responsibilities for adding, exchanging, and managing data in the system.

You will need to establish a preliminary budget for tracking system procurement or development. The more extensive and customized your needs, the more you will need to budget for the system. Refine the final budget amount as you go through the steps below and select a specific system.

Assess Your Needs and Resources

Identify your program's needs for a project tracking system. Potential needs could include the following:

- Monitor all active leads and upgrade projects
- Coordinate steps in the assessment and upgrade process with contractors (process flowcharts from your [implementation plan](#) can help you understand what process steps you need to track and coordinate with contractors)
- Communicate with homeowners about where they are in the assessment and upgrade process
- Collect and manage data on past and current project activities and outcomes for process and impact evaluations
- Report data for ongoing program management, assessment, and communication (e.g., through internal reports, dashboards, reports to funders)
- Serve as a reporting portal for contractors to submit required documentation on all completed projects.

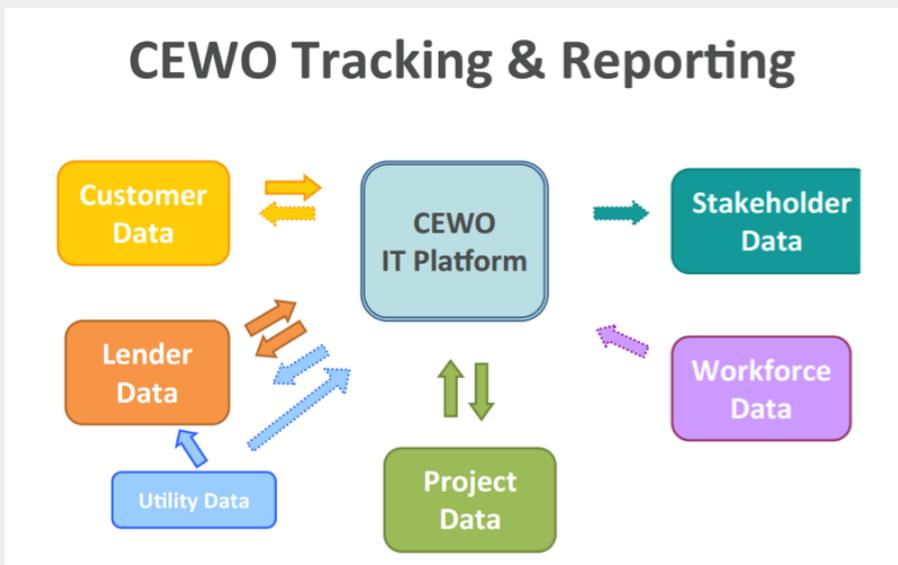
When assessing needs, be sure to communicate internally with staff to assess needs of all program components. For example, your program’s approach to [contractor engagement](#) may require that your system be able to import information from field-based modeling software. Your program’s approach to [evaluation](#) will require collection and tracking of certain types of data through the system to generate regular progress reports or track overall impacts.

Enhabit’s Information Technology Platform Reduced Administrative Burden and Provided Valuable Data to the Program and Partners

When [Enhabit](#) scaled up from a Portland-focused pilot program to a statewide program, its focus went from upgrading 500 homes in a year to upgrading 6,000 homes in three years. Program managers realized that one challenge for the pilot in Portland was the high administrative burden of its “hands on” approach to multiple communications among customers, customer service representatives, energy advisors, and the program lender. In addition, manual data collection and management was time-consuming and prone to inaccuracy.

To streamline the process and reduce administrative burden as the program scaled up, Enhabit developed a unified service delivery platform that automated steps in the customer processes from application to completion. It allowed the program, customers, and partners to access data they needed to monitor and manage projects. This platform brought together data from customers, lenders, utilities, workforce partners, and program staff. Among other things, it offered an online application for customers, real time project tracking, a customer-facing project dashboard, and a dashboard to monitor overall program accomplishments.

Illustration of Tracking and Reporting



Source: [CEWO Tracking & Reporting](#), Enhabit, 2014.

For more information, see the presentation on Enhabit’s [data collection and analysis](#)

The Benefits of a Program Portal

In 2013, the size of [New York State Energy Research and Development Authority's](#) (NYSERDA) program warranted efficient and simple project management software. To meet this need, NYSERDA launched a program portal to enhance communication among homeowners, contractors, and program managers. The portal benefited program managers by tracking individual projects, collecting important data points, and allowing for deep and immediate data analysis. Contractors used the software to manage customers and report project data, which provided for simple and efficient administrative tasks, and accelerated project completion. For more information on the NYSERDA's project management portal, see the [2013 Reuters article](#).

Understand and Evaluate Your Options

Once you understand your needs, collect information about your options. System vendors can help you understand the products they offer and the needs these products will meet. You can compare these options to the cost and functions of a customized system.

To solicit information about options, many programs issue RFPs for data tracking systems.

- For example, see the [RFP](#) issued by the BetterBuildings Greensboro program in North Carolina program.
- EnergySmart in Colorado also issued an [RFP](#) for database management (among several other services), including managing its enterprise data management system for tracking residential energy efficiency customers and projects. (See tips on running a RFP under the step “Decide who will implement the program” above)

Once you have several options, you should evaluate them according to a set of criteria, such as:

- **Functionality**—Does it do what you need? Does it do things you don't need? Can it be customized?
- **Extensibility and flexibility**—Can the system grow with the program? Can it adapt to your needs as the program evolves?
- **Complexity**—What are the training and support needs for staff to effectively use the system?
- **Compatibility**—Will the system work with other systems you have or those of partners with whom you need to exchange data?
- **Cost**—How do the costs of systems compare relative to the performance you need?

Consider Small Steps Rather than a Big Leap When Developing a Project Tracking System

Some Better Buildings Neighborhood Program programs tried to build everything they might need into a system from the start. This proved difficult and time-intensive. Programs were more successful and less frustrated when they developed systems to initially meet minimum needs and then took incremental steps to enhance their systems to meet emerging needs.

Adapt, Test, and Refine the System

Once you have decided on a system, you will inevitably need to customize it to your program. For commercially-available systems, be sure to contract for vendor support for customization and trouble-shooting, so that the vendor can help you adapt and fine-tune the system for your program. If your program develops its own customized product, make sure you have the internal staff capacity for ongoing refinement and trouble-shooting. Before launching the program, you should fully test the system and its compatibility with other systems with which it will need to interact or exchange data.

Plan for regular system maintenance and potential adaptation of the system throughout program implementation. If you are contracting for project tracking system support, make sure you include a provision in the contract for your developer to update the software as you modify your program.

Develop customer care resources

Customer care resources represent all of the ways in which your program gives customers reliable, easy-to-access information about the program (and their status in it as well as fields for customer concerns and complaints). To help ensure customer satisfaction, strive for superior customer service by being ready to address questions and concerns rapidly and accurately. Programs typically implement this aspect of their program through call centers, website or email inquiries, and standard information that addresses common issues (e.g., “Frequently Asked Questions” resources).

RePower Kitsap Puts its Help Desk Front and Center

The [RePower Kitsap](#) program in Washington State provides customers with a link to its help desk directly from the program's home page. Customers can contact help desk staff through a phone number or email. The website language makes it clear that the program wants to help customers, saying: "Whether you have questions about the recommendations you received from your energy advisor or contractor, or need help deciding which improvement is best for your home, RePower is here to help."

RePower Kitsap Online Help Desk



Source: [RePower Kitsap](#), 2014.

These resources are often the most visible part of your program to your customers. For quality customer service, your customer care should:

- Answer customer questions quickly and accurately
- Understand where the customer is in the upgrade process and key next steps
- Track previous interactions to provide continuity for the customer
- Internally, track common issues or complaints to help you [assess and improve](#) your program and ensure continuous improvement.

Training is vital for customer care. For example, call center or online support staff should:

- Be familiar with all materials and messages being distributed about your program
- Be well versed in all of the steps of the onsite energy assessment and upgrade process. This allows them to communicate to customers what to expect and to understand the experience about which a customer may be reporting or inquiring
- Fully understand all program services (e.g., types of measures, financing) and incentives for which customers are eligible
- Have a process for responding to customers in a timely manner, if needed. For information that call center staff cannot provide, they should have an efficient process for referrals or for getting back to customers quickly. Providing incorrect or misleading information through a call center—or failing to get back to a concerned customer at all—can seriously undermine program credibility.

If you are planning a call center for a new program, you should see if there are related energy programs in your area. If so, determine whether they have call centers already established, or are interested in collaborating to establish one.

In training your customer care staff, you may want to give them the opportunity to go on an energy assessment or visit a contractor crew installing some of the more common residential energy efficiency measures in your program. You may also want to invest in having them complete some home performance training or certification—at least at an introductory level—to better serve customers and grow professionally.

Consider sales training for anyone who will interact with customers. Every interaction is an opportunity to close a sale or get a referral in the future.

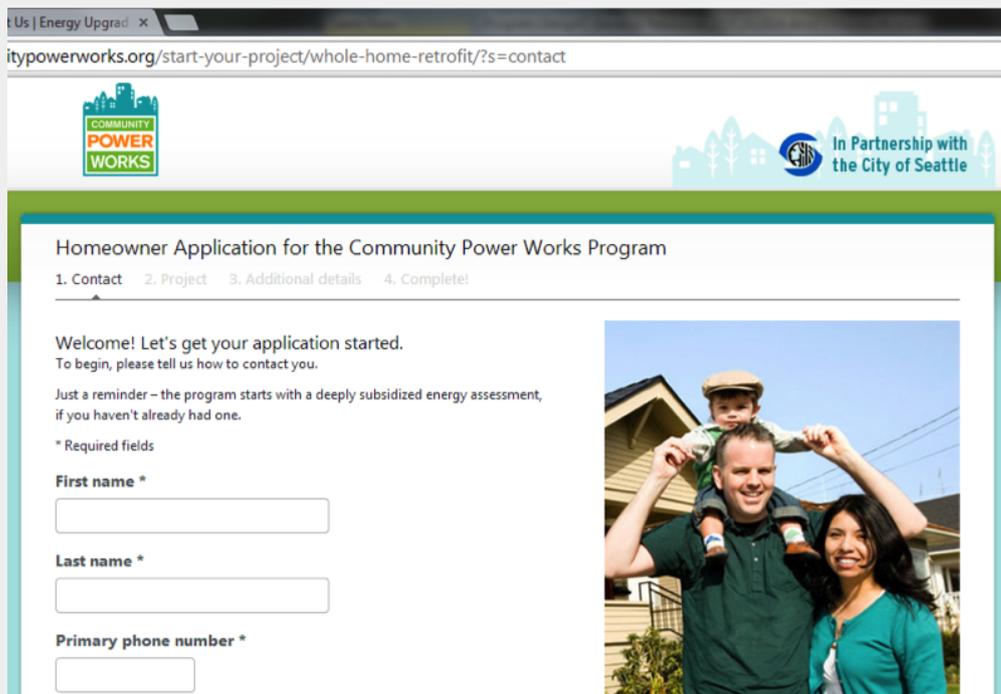
Develop customer intake process templates and forms

Customer intake process templates and forms allow your program to collect up-front information about customers that will allow you to provide assessment and upgrade services to them. In addition to basic information about the customer and home, the intake process is also a good time to get customers' authorization to obtain utility energy consumption history (if the program is not run by a utility that already has access to this information), both for estimating energy savings and for carrying out evaluations of the program.

Seattle's Online Homeowner Application Makes it Easy for Customers to Sign Up

Seattle's [Community Power Works](#), along with many other programs, provides customers with an easy to use online application form linked directly to the program's website. The Community Power Works site collects basic information about name, contact information, location, and characteristics of the applicant's home, such as age, size, and fuel type. The application form also asks if there is a specific contractor with which the homeowner would prefer to work and uses location data to determine whether the home is within the program's service boundaries.

Community Power Works Online Application

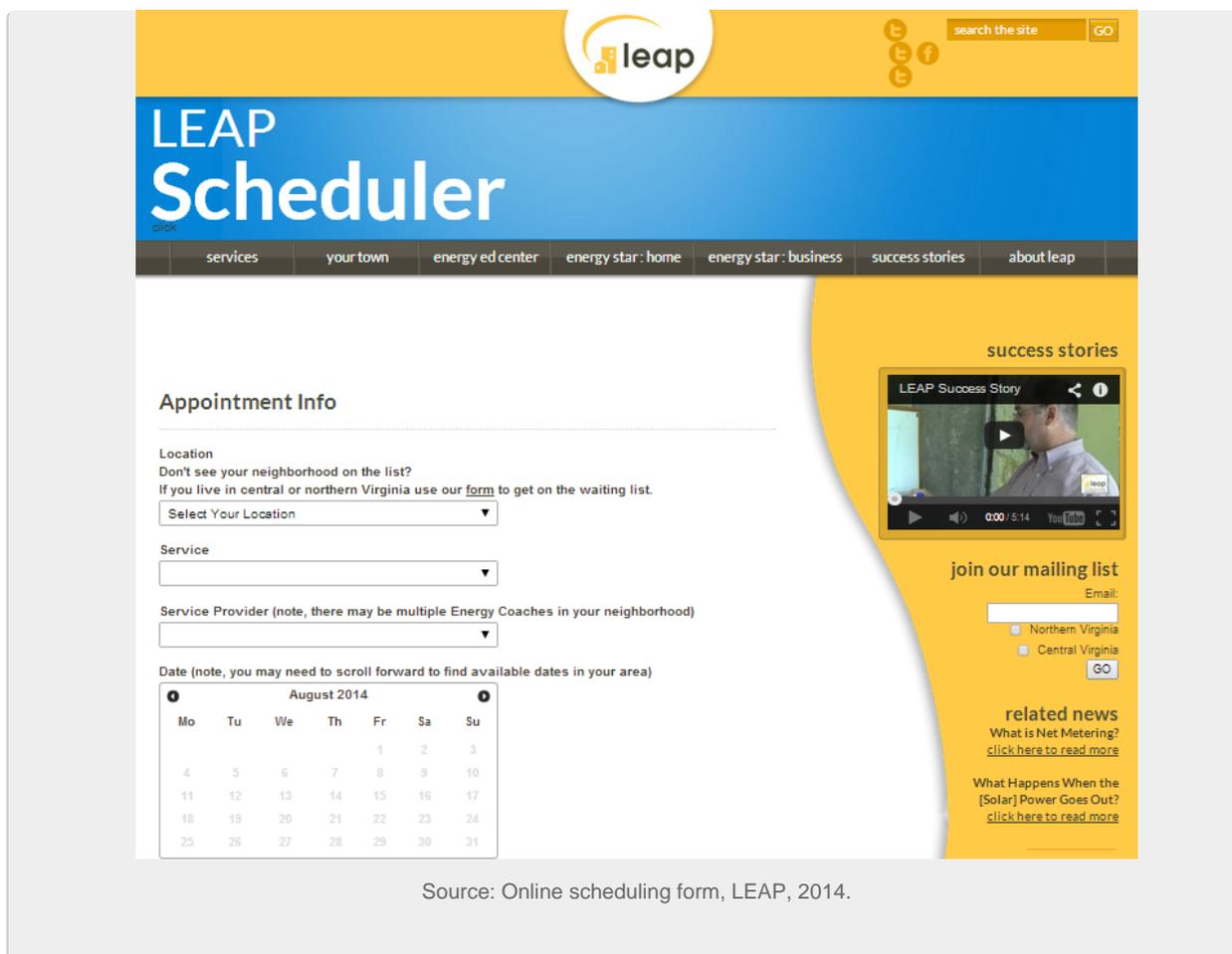


The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL citypowerworks.org/start-your-project/whole-home-retrofit/?s=contact. The page features the Community Power Works logo and a partnership logo with the City of Seattle. The main heading is "Homeowner Application for the Community Power Works Program". Below the heading is a progress indicator with four steps: "1. Contact", "2. Project", "3. Additional details", and "4. Complete!". The "1. Contact" step is active. The form content includes a welcome message: "Welcome! Let's get your application started. To begin, please tell us how to contact you." followed by a reminder: "Just a reminder – the program starts with a deeply subsidized energy assessment, if you haven't already had one." Below this is a section for "Required fields" with three input boxes: "First name *", "Last name *", and "Primary phone number *". To the right of the form is a photograph of a family (a man, a woman, and a child) standing in front of a house.

Source: [Homeowner Application for the Community Power Works Program](#), Community Power Works, 2014.

The [LEAP](#) program in Virginia provided another example of an easy-to-use customer form to schedule a home energy assessment.

LEAP Online Scheduling Form



Source: Online scheduling form, LEAP, 2014.

When determining what information you need, remind yourself that your goal is to make participation as easy as possible for your customers.

- You should only ask for information that is necessary in light of your program goals and evaluation plans. For example, if your program has a goal of providing services to households with children under five, you need to know how many children live in the house and what their ages are.
- Make sure that customers only have to provide each piece of information once – whether on an application form, with the call center, or to a contractor.

All programs need basic pieces of information for tracking customer progress, ensuring that required authorizations and releases have been signed and that incentive payments are sent to the right person. Common customer information collected at intake includes:

- Customer name
- Customer mailing address
- Customer email address
- Property address
- Customer home and cell phone numbers
- The best time to reach customers and their preferred approach (e.g., phone or email)
- Whether the customer is the property owner and contact information for owner(s)
- Primary heating fuel, utility, and account number
- Electric utility and account number
- Information about how the customer learned about the program
- Information about specific concerns that have prompted the customer's interest in the program.

Obtaining Information with the Customer (and Program Staff) in Mind

Your program should make it as easy as possible for customers to provide information. The tips below can help.

Offer different ways to provide data. The easiest way for customers to get you their information may differ by target audience segment. For younger customers, filling out a form on a website at their convenience may be easiest, but that same form could be a deterrent and headache for a senior who doesn't spend much time using a computer.

Give customers enough time to provide data. Most customers will need a little bit of time to provide account numbers, so asking for them over the phone may not be successful. Depending on the scope of your program, you may need to try different approaches to find the one that will do the best job of getting you the information you need with the least effort on the part of customers and staff.

Ask for information at the most appropriate time. You should also think about when you need information. For example, will you collect only the most basic information at intake, and then have an energy advisor or contractor collect more detailed information as the project develops? This may be less burdensome for the customer who is still on the fence about following through than it would be to try to collect every bit of data at the beginning.

Make it easy to enter customer data into your internal systems. If you decide to ask customers to fill out a paper form, try to organize the form in a way that will have a logical flow and that will also be consistent with the user interface for your tracking system. Don't create a situation that has your program staff flipping back and forth between pages on the intake form if they are doing data entry. If you are using web forms, organize them to mirror the data fields in your database, which will streamline the data entry process.

Make it easy on contractors that are collecting and using data. Develop forms and systems that make it efficient for contractors to enter and report data to the program. Help them access data from your system in a usable form.

Put yourself in your customers' place. Always review any process with the customer's experience in mind to ensure that you aren't creating unreasonable requirements. Think about your reaction if a program that you were interested in asked you to do what you are asking your customers to do.

Ensuring the Privacy of Customers' Data

Since it is important for your program to demonstrate its accomplishments, it is important to keep track of who participates in your program and what actions they undertake. However, information that could be used to identify individual customers should never be shared publicly, with third parties, or with program funders or regulators. You should also have security measures in place to protect the data.

If you are going to share customer-specific information you will need customers' permission or a non-disclosure agreement that protects customers' identifying information. You should also establish an employment policy that prohibits the sharing of customer data.

A useful resource for energy data privacy is the SEE Action Network's guide, [A Regulator's Privacy Guide to Third-Party Data Access for Energy Efficiency](#).

Develop financial processing systems for incentives (as needed)

If your program issues rebates or other financial incentives to customers or contractors, you will need a financial processing system for issuing and tracking those payments. To develop a system, you need to track eligibility, establish procedures for transferring funds, and ensure that payments are accurate and documented.

Typically there are several steps to processing financial incentives:

1. Determine the amount of the payment based on your program's incentive calculation methods
2. Determine eligibility of recipient (note that data from customers on eligibility can be collected through intake processing forms as described in the step above)
3. Complete and submit the payment request with appropriate authorization to your accounting staff
4. Receive checks or electronic funds transfer (EFT) statements from your accounting staff
5. Ensure that the payment amounts are consistent with the submitted requests and document the payments in your tracking database
6. Send the checks or EFT statements to customers and/or contractors.

In addition, the accounting staff will need to have a payment processing system in place. If your organization operates other types of programs that require payment processing, accounting procedures will likely be in place (e.g., a payment request protocol that requires both a “requester” and an approval signature from someone other than the person who made the request). These are common practices to reduce the opportunity for fraud and graft.

You should seek to make incentive processing timely and efficient. Establish target timeframes for each step and work to reduce times as you gain more experience. Customers and contractors will get frustrated if they need to wait 60-90 days or more for payments.

The U.S. Department of Energy report, [“Lessons Learned from the State Energy Efficiency Appliance Rebate Program”](#) describes how different programs implemented state-funded appliance rebate programs, and offers recommendations for specific program models for use by states, utilities and energy efficiency organizations when designing rebate programs.

Tips for Success

In recent years, hundreds of communities have been working to promote home energy upgrades through programs such as the Better Buildings Neighborhood Program, Home Performance with ENERGY STAR, utility-sponsored programs, and others. The following tips present the top lessons these programs want to share related to this handbook. This list is not exhaustive.

Provide customers with a single point of contact to help them through the upgrade process

While homeowners may be interested in the benefits of an energy upgrade, many are deterred from completing an upgrade project because of the complex and unknown process. Often, a significant portion of homeowners who receive energy assessments do not continue with the upgrades. As part of the Better Buildings Neighborhood Program, multiple programs across the country tested a range of customer service strategies through a single point of contact to guide homeowners through the entire upgrade process. These program staff members are often called energy advisors or energy coaches and can provide a combination of services to help customers overcome barriers to home energy upgrades.

This approach – identifying barriers and providing targeted services through dedicated energy advisors to overcome them – has produced higher conversion rates and more satisfied customers; however, these services can also be time-intensive and increase the cost of program delivery. For more information on utilizing energy advising services to minimize informational, decision-making, and transactional barriers faced by homeowners, see [Energy Advisors: Improving Customer Experience and Efficiency Program Outcomes](#).

- [EnergySmart](#) in Boulder County, Colorado, found that having an energy advisor assigned to each program participant through the home energy upgrade process was a key to program success. Energy advisors built trust with the customer during an initial home visit and maintained a one-on-one relationship with homeowners throughout the process. Energy advisor services included installing low-cost measures, reviewing the assessment report and work scope, assisting with contractor selection, and helping with program paperwork. The relationship endured after the upgrade: after they completed their first upgrade, program participants frequently continued to stay in communication with energy advisors about additional projects and questions. Through customer surveys, Boulder found that 97% of customers rated their energy advisor as professional, knowledgeable, and timely. These customers agreed that “working with my Energy Advisor has been worth my time and effort.” In Boulder, around 60-70% of homeowners enrolled in the program took actions to upgrade their homes.
- Energy advisors for [Enhabit](#), formerly Clean Energy Works Oregon, provided education, objective advice on the assessment report and work scope, and quality control to customers across nearly half of the state. Program staff helped customers initiate the process by scheduling a home energy assessment, and they provided a quality control review following upgrades. Advisors also monitored the progress of each project through internal project pipeline status reports, which helped reduce bottlenecks and minimize customer frustration. The energy advisor strategy helped Enhabit achieve a 94% customer satisfaction rating during the program pilot. Enhabit found that in some cases—such as having energy advisors present at assessments conducted by high performing contractors—the program could reduce energy advisor services without impacting customer satisfaction or reducing the number of upgrades completed. This knowledge allowed the program to reallocate their resources.
- The [Denver Energy Challenge](#) provided customers with free energy advisor services starting with an initial phone call. The energy advisors helped customers by identifying available rebates and financing options, finding qualified home improvement contractors, reviewing bids, providing education on energy improvements, and even connecting qualified residents with other free or subsidized energy improvement services outside of the Denver Energy Challenge. As a result of this support, nearly 75% of customers who worked with an energy advisor went on to complete a home energy upgrade.
- [NeighborWorks of Western Vermont](#) staff scheduled all contractor visits for its customers residing in small towns across Rutland County. Once contractors completed home energy assessments, energy advisors reviewed assessment reports with customers. This review helped customers understand the content of the reports and prioritize improvements to be undertaken based on their needs and budgets. Energy advisors helped customers apply for financing (as needed) – a common point in the upgrade process where projects stall – and move on to the next steps. The energy advisor acted as the customer’s primary point of contact for information about the assessment and upgrade process. This approach contributed to the program’s success in completing over 600 upgrades from 2010 through 2013.
- [Greater Cincinnati Energy Alliance](#) (GCEA) energy advisors helped homeowners through every aspect of the upgrade process, from requesting an assessment to hiring a contractor. The program found that offering energy advising services through one individual person – the energy advisor – made potential customers more comfortable with the program, even if many customers did not actually contact the advisor. This hands-on customer service increased the number of completed upgrades and ensured that a high standard of quality was maintained throughout the process.

Provide adequate time for data system development and testing

Many Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners found that setting up their information technology (IT) systems early in the program design stage ensured that data terms and data entry procedures were consistently applied by all system users. Reaching agreement with stakeholders (e.g., contractors, lenders, marketing partners, evaluators, program staff) on what data the data system would collect, known as system requirements, and how the collected data would be used to evaluate the program helped programs ensure that the data collected was complete. Programs have also found that they receive data of the quality needed for graphs and cost-effectiveness calculations when stakeholders agree up front that the data will be used for these purposes and not just to track energy savings and expenditures.

- **Be SMART Maryland** found that transitioning from spreadsheet-based data collection system to a customized energy IT system was crucial to administering a multifaceted energy efficiency program with rigorous data collection requirements. Investing in their system while they were still designing their program allowed Be SMART to smoothly integrate the system into the program's operations and to ensure quality data collection and integrity over time. Be SMART also found that while spreadsheets were useful tools in collecting data, their use in analyzing data and generating reports was limited, since the program had to go through a time-consuming consolidation process to combine data from different sources and spreadsheets.
- In Boulder County, Colorado, **EnergySmart** found that it took between four to six months for a database developer and coding consultant to fully develop and test the data system because of its high level of complexity and the customization required. The program also found that having actual users test the system with real inputs and real reporting requirements helped ensure better data quality and user-friendliness. In addition, EnergySmart found that before beginning database development, it was important to reach agreement among stakeholders on what reporting will be expected, and design the database to facilitate building and exporting the reports. For EnergySmart, it was important to set expectations with report recipients about the IT system's reporting capabilities early on in the process, so recipients did not expect reports that the system was unable to produce.

Make upgrade options clear and concise for customers

Programs in many regions of the U.S. find that the concept of home performance is new to homeowners. Homeowners may not know how energy efficiency measures compare (e.g., energy savings benefits of insulation versus new windows) or have not heard about some effective measures, such as air sealing. Programs can help customers overcome decision paralysis with a prioritized list of upgrade recommendations and help deciding which measures to undertake. Several programs have devised simple approaches to help customers understand the energy savings, cost savings, and other benefits from various types of measures, so homeowners can choose what is best for them. Recognize that customers may have other priorities when considering an assessment's proposed measures (e.g., improving the look of their home with new windows or replacing an aging furnace before winter weather sets in).

- **Austin Energy** developed a form to estimate energy savings using a point system that contractors could use with residents during a home assessment. The form helped contractors and customers quickly determine which measures would achieve 15% energy savings in the home. Texas A&M's Energy Systems Laboratory validated the point system for the program to ensure its accuracy and integrity. The program found that this streamlined approach was appealing to customers and contractors.
- **Los Angeles County's Energy Upgrade California** implemented the **Flex Path program** that used a point system to show the energy savings from a menu of energy upgrade measures. To be eligible for program rebates, residents then selected which measures they would like to undertake that would total over 100 points and achieve 15% energy savings.
- **Michigan Saves**, formerly BetterBuildings for Michigan, provided customers with a "base package" that included an energy assessment, direct installs of compact fluorescent light bulbs and water saving devices, and basic measures like air and duct sealing. Customers could then choose to undertake additional measures (e.g., insulation, furnace replacement) in addition to the base package. The program found that the clear and concise base package was a good way to get people into the program, but it wasn't sufficient to reach the program's goal of 15% energy savings in upgraded homes. Getting homeowners to achieve higher energy savings through additional measures required incentives, such as rebates and low interest financing. For more information, see the case study [Experiment to Find the Right Mix of Incentives](#).

Provide information to help customers pick the right contractor

Early on, many Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners focused on providing customers with a range of contractors to choose from, while providing contractors with access to customers. Customer feedback received by some programs, however, indicated that customers were confused or overwhelmed by the choices. A comprehensive [evaluation](#) of selected program strategies implemented by Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners found that programs were more successful when they provided customers with lists of pre-approved contractors; however, offering long lists of contractors without differentiating their products and services often led to inaction. To help customers distinguish between contractors and choose a qualified one, many programs provide customers with information about contractor skills, quality of past performance, proximity, and other factors. Some programs matched individual contractors directly with individual customers.

Customers can provide valuable information about the quality of contractors' performance, and this feedback can supplement other information, such as field inspections, used to differentiate contractors based on their performance. Many Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners incorporated customer ratings into the order in which they list contractors online, to help future customers select a contractor. Some programs also used rankings to evaluate contractors, support disciplinary actions, allocate benefits, and identify retraining needs. Through this approach, contractors had the opportunity to improve their standing and reap the rewards when customers saw that they could be relied on to do high-quality work.

- On [Maryland's Home Performance with ENERGY STAR website](#), homeowners can rate and review their contractors. Some contractors choose to reach out to their customers to encourage them to provide reviews. These customer reviews, along with contractors' accreditations and services, are published on the website as part of each contractor's information page. Users of the website can search for contractors and sort the results based on homeowner ratings and by geographical location. Users can also narrow their results according to which contractors participate in the customer's local utility rebate program.
- [Efficiency Maine](#) provided customers with a "[Find a Residential Registered Vendor](#)" locator on its website. This locator listed the services each contractor offered, sorted the list by distance from the homeowner, and differentiated contractors based on number of projects completed and customer satisfaction. All contractors were added to the list when they met the program's requirements. The list was sorted by location closest to the customer and number of completed projects, and also noted what services the contractor provides. The website also listed [questions](#) a homeowner could use to interview and evaluate contractors, such as "How soon can you begin?" and "How quickly will my work be completed?"
- The Town of Bedford's [Energize New York program](#) learned that selecting a contractor was the primary barrier for homeowners interested in home performance upgrades. The program addressed this challenge by developing a rating system to differentiate high- and low-performing contractors. Contractors' ratings were calculated using a combination of customer survey results, the number of BPI certifications held by their technicians, and their number of completed upgrade projects. Some contractors were dissatisfied when they received low ratings, and in follow-up discussions, program staff reminded contractors that they would have an opportunity for their score to be updated quarterly and reviewed the scoring criteria. As a result, many of those contractors decided to improve their overall score. The program also set a minimum standard of completed projects (i.e., six completed projects over the last four quarters) for contractors to be included in the program. This narrowing of available contractors made it much easier for customers to select one without being overwhelmed.
- Seattle's [Community Power Works](#) began matching homeowners one-on-one with certified contractors to create the best fit based on homeowner needs, contractor skills, and contractor availability. The program found that its past approach of suggesting two or three contractors led to indecision and that the potential price advantage of competition among these contractors was not an important factor in homeowner satisfaction.
 - Programs should be transparent about the process of matching individual contractors to customers and ensure that all qualified contractors have the chance to participate in the program by competing for upgrade projects.
 - While Community Power Works did not encounter any issues, programs should recognize that this approach can limit competition among contractors and discourage the growth of new contractors in the market. Most programs, including [Enhabit](#), [Austin Energy](#), [Energy Impact Illinois](#), and many others, mitigate this by allowing contractors who bring their own customers to the program to keep them, providing an incentive for the contractor to market themselves instead of relying on the program to generate demand.

Examples

The following resources are examples from individual residential energy efficiency programs, which include case studies, program presentations and reports, and program materials. The U.S. Department of Energy does not endorse these materials.

Case Studies

None available at this time.

Program Presentations & Reports

[Clean Energy Works Portland: Data Collection & Analysis](#)

Author: Marlowe Kulley, Portland Bureau of Planning & Sustainability

Publication Date: 2011

This presentation is a tour of the project evaluation and data collection system that Clean Energy Works Portland uses to survey its participating residents.

Program Materials

[Boulder County Request for Proposal: Colorado Retrofit Ramp-Up Support Services \(169 KB\)](#)

Author: Boulder County, Colorado

Publication Date: 2010

Example Request for Proposal (RFP) to provide Boulder County, Colorado with support services for its Retrofit Ramp Up Program including a social mobilization campaign, database management services, and marketing/public relations services for the both the residential and commercial parts of the Program.

[City of Greensboro Request for Proposal: Business Process Management Information Technology Tool \(788 KB\)](#)

Author: BetterBuildings for Greensboro

Publication Date: 2012

Example Request for Proposal (RFP) to provide The City of Greensboro with an estimate for the work required to create a Business Process Management Information Technology Tool (BPM IT Tool) for a municipal energy efficiency project.

[Request for Proposals for Phase V \(Neighborhood Phase\) of Clean Energy Works Portland \(now Enhabit\) \(226 KB\)](#)

Author: Clean Energy Works Oregon (now Enhabit)

Publication Date: 2010

This is an example of an RFP for workforce development and other program elements. The RFP covers recruitment, outreach and marketing oriented to homeowners and workers, and service delivery of energy assessments and upgrades.

Toolbox

The following resources are available to help design, implement, and evaluate possible activities related to this handbook. These resources include templates and forms, as well as tools and calculators. The U.S. Department of Energy does not endorse these materials.

Templates & Forms

None available at this time.

Tools & Calculators

None available at this time.

Topical Resources

The following resources provide additional topical information related to this handbook, which include presentations, publications, and webcasts. Visit [Examples](#) for materials from and about individual programs.

Topical Presentations

None available at this time.

Publications

[Home Performance with ENERGY STAR Sponsor Guide and Reference Manual \(v1.5\)](#)

Author: U.S. Department of Energy

Publication Date: 2014

The Sponsor Guide was designed to assist with developing an implementation plan for a Home Performance with ENERGY STAR program. It covers key elements of the plan, including the scope and objectives of the program and the policies and procedures that will ensure its success. The Sponsor Guide is divided into seven sections, each covering a specific requirement of the HPwES Program: Use and Management of the Home Performance with ENERGY STAR Mark, Program Design and Development, Workforce Development and Support, The Assessment, Project Installation, Quality Assurance, Tracking and Reporting.

[Rapid Deployment Energy Efficiency Planning Guide](#)

Author: U.S. Department of Energy; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Publication Date: 2009

This guide helps state and local authorities and energy efficiency program administrators choose successful programs in response to energy efficiency program funding opportunities through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. It provides information and lessons learned about ten different types of programs--such as Home Performance with ENERGY STAR--across the residential, commercial, and industrial sectors.

[Residential Retrofit Program Design Guide](#)

Author: Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Publication Date: 2011

The Residential Retrofit Program Design Guide focuses on the key elements and design characteristics of building and maintaining a successful residential energy upgrade program. The material is presented as a guide for program design and planning from start to finish, laid out in chronological order of program development.

[Lessons Learned from the State Energy Efficient Appliance Rebate Program](#)

Author: U.S. Department of Energy

Publication Date: 2014

This paper explores the State Energy Efficient Appliance Rebate Program (SEEARP) designs and delivery methods used, and provides lessons learned about specific program models and best practices for states, utilities, and energy efficiency organizations to use in designing rebate programs.

Webcasts

Home Performance with ENERGY STAR

[Presentation](#) (4 MB), [Media](#), [Transcript](#)

Author: Chandler von Schrader, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Casey Murphy, ICF International; Matthew Phillips, Austin Energy

Publication Date: 2010

Overview of the Home Performance with ENERGY STAR program for existing homes.

Residential Retrofit Program Design Guide Overview

[Presentation](#), [Media](#) (75 MB), [Transcript](#)

Author: Richard Faesy, Energy Futures Group; Andy Meyer, Efficiency Maine; Nikki Kuhn, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation

Publication Date: 2011

Webcast on the DOE Residential Retrofit Program Design Guide, which focuses on the key elements and design characteristics of building and maintaining a successful residential upgrade program.

