

Alaska's 2008 W.A.P. Network Managed BIG Growth in State Funding: *Lessons for ARRA W.A.P. Ramp-Up*

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Alaska's Weatherization Assistance Program (W.A.P.) leadership spent 2008 meeting the challenge of a 12-fold increase in the program as a result of Governor Palin's state-funded initiative. Alaska's solutions may work for other states currently ramping-up for the federal Recovery Act. The list of challenges and solutions presented below is discussed in further detail in the five sections that follow.

The Main Challenges Are:

1. Covering all areas using the available network

Lessons learned:

- Use new agencies for only targeted assignments;

2. Expediting the training process for new workers

Lessons learned:

- Increase the number of basics sessions available to crew and contractors;
- Focus on supervisors and inspectors;
- Rely on past training partners and additional out-of-state trainers at peak training times to supplement a state's existing resources;
- Training in rural areas – focus on on-the-job delivery;
- Training materials are available;

3. Managing contractors effectively while ramping-up

Lessons learned:

- Improve contractor energy efficiency results with detailed contract provisions;
- Improve contractor training with more inspector/auditor contact;

4. Ramping-up client recruitment

Lessons learned:

- Use door-to-door outreach and energy audits to recruit in rural communities;

5. Handling increased client or contractor inquiries about the program

Lessons learned:

- Use call center to direct clients to the appropriate service provider and make call center purpose clear to client base.

Background:

In early 2008, Alaska approved dramatic supplemental state appropriations for the low-income W.A.P. and the Home Energy Rebate Program for all income levels.

The funding for the state W.A.P., \$200 million, to be spent over three years was a 12-fold annual increase compared with the \$5.8 million 2007 program funding from all sources, and the average of \$5.17 million over the previous 27 years. The \$200 million budget also dwarfs the \$18 million that Alaska will receive from the Recovery Act.

The program increased eligibility qualifications for the W.A.P. from 60 to 100 percent of the adjusted median income. The plan will ultimately increase the number of Alaska homes weatherized each year from 600 to 7,500.¹ The number of weatherized homes will grow to around 1,800 in year one, 4,000 in year two, and 7,500 in year three. The state projects it will weatherize approximately 13,300 homes by the end of the state initiative.

Alaska has Unique Challenges and Common Concerns

Alaska has approximately 400 communities spread over 660,000 square miles and 5 climate zones. Alaska's communities are not interconnected and most are considered rural, accessible only by air and water. These characteristics pose unique logistic challenges that are unmatched in the Lower 48 states.

Nevertheless, the state's ramp-up is similar to the ramp-up Weatherization programs across the nation are now asked to undertake. Although the Alaska case involves state funding, the lessons in ramping-up training and other capabilities are very relevant.

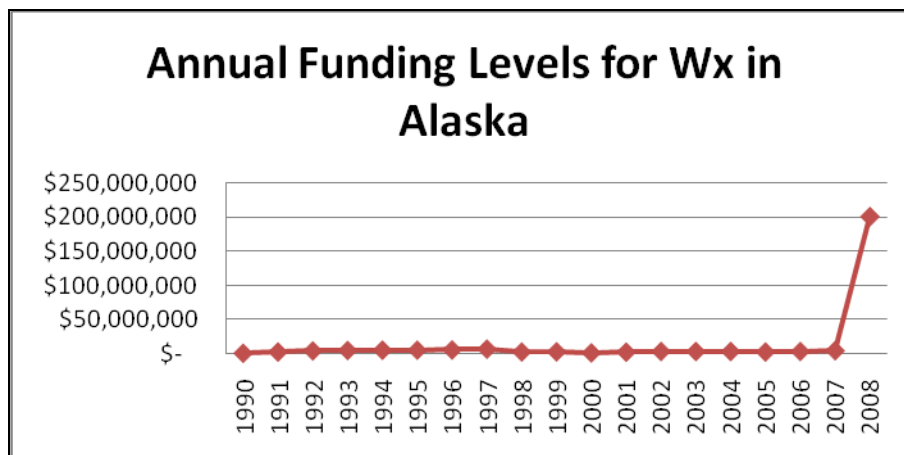
Alaska Program Details

The Department of Energy (DOE), the Low-Income Heating Energy Assistance program, and the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) fund the federal W.A.P.; AHFC administers it. There are five DOE Weatherization service providers;² including Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc. (RurAL CAP). For the state-funded expansion, the AHFC selected 15 local Housing Authorities to offer weatherization services and meet increased demand.³

¹ These AHFC figures are projections and do not represent exact figures.

² Alaska Community Development Corporation, Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc. (RurAL CAP), Interior Weatherization, the Municipality of Anchorage, and Tanana Chiefs Conference

³ The Housing Authorities are not eligible for American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funding. They will continue to weatherize using state funds.



Challenges Overcome and Lessons Learned:

Mimi Burbage, Alaska's W.A.P. Program Coordinator, is at the forefront of the state's ramp-up and has generously shared some of the lessons from her experience for this paper.⁴ RurAL CAP is one of the state's largest subgrantees, and Mitzi Barker, Director of Rural Housing and Planning, provided additional insight on lessons learned by local service providers as they have coped with the ramp-up.⁵ *Any errors are our responsibility.*

Alaska's leaders say the most important lesson they have to share is: it is essential for the experienced managers to keep their strategy flexible and to keep adapting to the dynamic nature of a ramp-up effort. State and local agencies alike should track their progress and their shortcomings constantly and remain prepared to modify their strategies to reflect lessons learned and evolving needs.

1. Covering All Areas Using the Available Network

Lesson: Use New Agencies for only Targeted Assignments

Although AHFC added 15 subgrantees to the state program to cope with the state program ramp-up, these providers will not deliver the federal program or use any federal funding source. They will not be in future competition with the 5 W.A.P. subgrantees as long as those agencies continue to deliver effective weatherization.

All the new agencies are local housing authorities with which AHFC has had well-established contractual relationships in state and federal housing programs. All of the

⁴ Information was obtained in a series of interviews that took place in March and April of 2009, following Ms. Burbage's presentation at the February meeting of the National Association of State Community Service Programs. (<http://www.waptac.org/si.asp?id=1306>). John Anderson at AHFC also contributed information.

⁵ Information was obtained in a series of interviews that took place from March through May of 2009

additional providers serve a limited geography and a defined set of units. As none had a workforce with the requisite weatherization skills, the procedures and solutions described below to ramp-up capacity and workforce, have applied to the 15 new organizations as well as existing subgrantees that expanded.

2. Expediting the Training Process for New Workers

Lesson: Increase the Number of Basics Sessions Available to Crew and Contractors

AHFC had sufficiently amplified training and capacity-building to double the state production rate by March 31, 2009. Much of the increased training capacity for the state's ramp-up was addressed by contracting with more trainers, rather than increasing training done by the agency staff. A significant change during the training ramp-up was the number of discreet subject modules conducted within a classroom setting. AHFC dictated the number of courses and the subjects to be taught, but the courses are conducted by contracted trainers and instructors who create their own curriculum. Courses are offered to Weatherization installers, inspectors, auditors, and contractors across the state throughout the year. Over 2,000 individuals have completed these 1-2 day subject modules since April of 2008.

Before the state ramp-up, speeding up the basics training program was less of a concern because the demand for trained Weatherizers was limited. *AHFC's new strategy has been to offer basics and fundamentals courses more often and in more places.*

The subject modules include: Basic Blower Door, Wx Tech, Moisture Control/Ventilation, Combustion Safety, AKWarm Workshop, Building Analyst/Energy Assessor, Envelope Specialist, and Hands-on Assessment and Air sealing. **Most important: the course topics and how often the classes are offered remains fluid.** This allows the program and the trainers to adapt to changing needs and challenges.

Within the last year, the Alaska W.A.P. also trained approximately 600 students in hands-on and field sessions that lasted 3-5 days on site or in realistic conditions.

Lesson: Focus on Supervisors and Inspectors with Basics and Beyond

The most effective way to speed up training for new hires turned out to be to focus first on supervisor and inspector training. AHFC has found that they can save time and cut costs in training by focusing on the assessors, inspectors, and supervisors. Once these individuals are trained they can share responsibility for training the remaining crew at the service provider level.

AHFC also found that sending inexperienced supervisors to attend basics and fundamentals classes is important. To supplement basics courses, agencies should send inexperienced supervisors and inspectors to spend a day in the field with the crew.

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This will give students a chance to become familiar with daily conflicts and challenges facing crews, and to see experienced supervisors at work.

Lesson: Rely on Past Training Partners and Additional Out-of-state Trainers at Peak Training Times to Supplement a State's Existing Resources

AHFC worked with a Washington Community Action Agency, The Opportunity Council (<http://www.opcco.org/>), which specializes in Weatherization training, to expand training, especially for supervisors. AHFC has worked with the organization in the past with good results and was able to quickly develop a supplemental training sessions. The Opportunity Council sent two trainers to Alaska 2-3 times to help train the trainers and supervisors. These sessions were scheduled when demand for trainers, supervisors and assessors was particularly high.

AHFC program managers recruited Energy Outwest (<http://www.energyoutwest.org/>) consultants for supplemental training. AHFC was able to set up 8 five-day training sessions for supervisors and crew leads throughout the summer of 2008 and to get several Energy Outwest trainers to lead them. These extended training sessions were supplemental to the regular AHFC training program.

More Strategies for Training in Rural Areas – Focus on On-the-job Delivery

RurAL CAP is coping with the shortage of experienced supervisors by rotating supervisors from areas that operate year-round to work in areas that operate only in the summer; this gets the most use out of seasoned staff. The agency has also been able to attract former employees back to work as trainers and supervisors.

Working in the agency's remote rural service areas means it is difficult for many of the new crew to attend the 1-2 day subject modules immediately after being hired; many receive their initial training as apprentices on the job. Their supervisors are trained in classes and then scattered across the service area where they, in turn, hire and train crews from within the communities. In year 2, RurAL CAP plans to start workshops in larger rural communities to train the local workforce and provide basic orientation to the program; supervisors will hire from among the successful participants.

Lesson: Training Materials are Available

AHFC found that many of the training materials they needed to give to their service providers and to train their agency staff were already available, including training manuals provided by Energy Outwest, the DOE Supported peer-network. They recommend John Krigger's *Residential Energy: Cost Savings and Comfort for Existing Buildings*, based on the Building Performance Institute (BPI) certification process, as particularly useful.

A group of “early adopters” are now BPI Building Analyst certified. Program managers are considering making the certification mandatory because it has proved useful for strengthening the team’s basics and fundamentals.

3. Managing Contractors Effectively while Ramping-up

AHFC has used several strategies to help service providers cope with contractor effectiveness as the amount of work that is contracted out increases.

Lesson: Improve Contractor Energy Efficiency Results with Detailed Contract Provisions

Some service providers based their contractor compensation on hours worked while others based compensation on the amount of assessor-recommended air leakage reduced. AHFC is now evaluating both approaches to figure out which works best for each service provider.

Unless otherwise dictated by law, Weatherization service providers should consider the advantages of switching to compensating contractors for assessor-recommended air leakage reduction, as opposed to estimated number of contractor hours worked.

Some of Alaska’s service providers found that contractors often substituted lower-quality supplies to increase their profits. This reduced the effectiveness of the weatherization process. In response, service providers have begun to use more detailed contracts that stipulate the types and brands of materials that contractors are required to use or install, in addition to outlining the work that the contractor must perform. AHFC is currently testing to see if this strategy will improve contractor results.

Lesson: Improve Contractor Training with more Inspector/Auditor Contact

Weatherization programs that hire contractors find that many contractors believe they already know the work as well as the Weatherizers on the service providers’ staff. However, “re-educating” contractors so that they first acknowledge gaps in their “building science” knowledge is a challenge for many service providers. This is particularly difficult for service providers during a ramp-up effort, as there are more contractors that require “re-educating”. It often takes 1-2 months for the contractor to understand how weatherization should be performed.

Conducting interim or extra inspections may improve quality assurance and correct contractor mistakes as they made. Frequent corrections will reinforce the learning process. This strategy identifies mistakes before the job is almost or thoroughly complete, saving the service provider and contractor time and money.

Bonus: Extra inspections are also a great way to create opportunities for training inspectors and monitors.

4. Ramping-up Client Recruitment

Lesson: Use Door-to-Door Outreach with Energy Audits to Recruit in Rural Communities

Some local Weatherizers may find it difficult to recruit enough additional clients as their program expands. RurAL CAP is using an alternative recruitment process that focuses on the “supply side,” rather than looking for client demand.

With a significant rural client base where most homes within a neighborhood or village are qualified, RurAL CAP is finding that it is much more effective to get out to the clients in person and offer services. A 2-3 person crew accompanied by a community member canvases one village at a time. The crew obtains client application information and performs a full energy audit of the residence to determine weatherization needs. No additional technical training is required to staff these crews, so RurAL CAP uses the existing crew members. This strategy works because RurAL CAP is focusing on whole villages where the majority of inhabitants are likely to qualify for W.A.P. services.

A respected community member or representative should accompany the crew to ensure client comfort and cooperation. The agency should work with community leaders to publicize its presence in the village/neighborhood prior to its arrival. Although no extra training is required for these crews, an ability to communicate well is particularly useful when explain the program and benefits to clients.

This alternative recruitment **strategy actually saves RurAL CAP money** over traditional outreach strategies because it allows them to complete the assessments and gather applications in one trip. It also reduces logistics and scheduling costs because there are no lags between the initial outreach and the client application.

5. Successfully Handling Increased Client Inquiries about the Program

Lesson: Use Call Center to Direct Clients to the Appropriate Service Provider and make Call Center Purpose Clear to Client Base

The AHFC established a contractor-managed call center to handle the rush of inquiries it expected to receive for the Home Energy Rebate Program. Though the call center was initially set up for another program, many individuals interested in the W.A.P. used it. This caused some consumer confusion in the beginning because clients did not know what program the call center was servicing. Despite this, the call center was a very successful initiative for both the W.A.P. and the Rebate program.

The AHFC’s experience suggests that call centers are fairly simple to set up. The call center operators should be trained to understand the income requirements for eligible clients. Operators should be familiar with the various territories and service providers involved. Set up took about a month in Alaska.

Outcome = Success! In a year since the beginning of the state-ordered ramp-up, Alaska doubled its production and trained over 2,500 individuals. The state is currently on track to increase its production to over 13,000 homes in three years. The AHFC and the state's service providers continue to ramp-up as they wait to for final details about their Recovery Act funding so that they can more accurately project their final production numbers. Although this study presents the many lessons already learned, the Alaska team is continuously learning and adjusting its ramp-up strategy.

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