**VECAN 2013 Conference**

**Notes from Limited Income Discussion**

**Notes by Paul Markowitz**

**Introductory Remarks from Anita Kelman, Central Vermont Community Action Council**

* There is no “low-income" person, only people with low-incomes
* Those with low-incomes vary as much as those of higher incomes. Many people are in the low-income category at some point in their life.
* One could describe a number of categories that those with low-income could fit in: some general ones could be:

1. Starving artists/musicians/writers/dancers/workers at non-profits etc.
2. Young 2-parent families
3. Single-parents, many very low-income but not all
4. Middle-aged and poor; disabled, unemployed, mentally ill, etc.; long-time struggles
5. Formerly better off- unemployed or disabled and struggling etc. but used to doing better and often well educated
6. Retired; could be doing ok or those who retired 20 years ago and are really struggling financially

* Looking at these groups one can see that their needs/issues vary tremendously and so do their values and interests.
* The commonality among all with low-incomes is the desire to reduce their utility bills(electric and thermal)
  + Climate change and enviro concerns will only resonate with some of these groups
  + If we only promote energy savings for “save the planet/penguins/polar bears” purposes we will miss many people who don’t see that as a concern for them.
  + We need to speak their language and connect with their needs
  + Some of these people will think that energy savings/being green is just about solar panels, electric cars and other unobtainable items. Thus they can’t participate and feel disenfranchised.
* We need to reach these people, validate what they are already doing (CFL’s, t-stat setbacks, wood heat, pellet stoves, etc.)
  + Help them realize that what they are doing creates energy savings.
  + It doesn’t matter why people are saving energy, just that they are doing it. The end result is the same. The “why” only factors in when you consider the message to reach them with.
* If we want low-income people to participate in energy use reductions, along with behavior change, physical changes need subsidies. eg: Providing CFL’s to the food shelves for distribution has really resulted in many people who use the food shelf installing these in their homes. I see lots of mobile homes with all CFL’s and they came from the food shelf. People who are struggling to pay their bills are not going to buy these at the store. They will use them if they can get them and understand what it will do for their electric bill.
  + If we want them to be able to weatherize their homes, we need more funding for weatherization services.
* Don’t forget that many people struggling with low income also have issues such as depression, poor health, etc. Hard for them to just get thru the day let alone worry about the ice caps melting. Need to be sensitive to their needs and struggles. How does what we are advocating relate to them and make their struggle easier?

**Framing Questions for the Discussion**

* How can we reach low-income communities/individuals?
* What are some efforts that you have undertaken?
* What are some of the particular challenges that you found that low-income households face?
* What are some successes you have realized
* How can town energy committees strengthen their connections with low-income communities?

**Discussion**

**Overall approach/message:**

* We need to be intentional
* Make sure we reach out to renters – not just homeowners – as many low-income households don’t own their homes.
* Don’t under-estimate the value of basic education
* Speak to wherever people are coming from
* Low-income households are especially keen on saving money

**Lack of affordability is a key issue**: Many low-income households can’t afford comprehensive efficiency retrofits. We should also be promoting lower cost measures and behavioral changes that they can afford.

**Low-Income Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP**): Households with incomes of 80% or below the median income are eligible. Managed by the community action agencies; provides free audits and retrofits. One-two year waiting list in most parts of the state.

* Long waiting list is due to high demand and limited funding. There will be efforts in the next legislative session to increase the funding for WAP. Problem is lack of sufficient funding. TECs can contact their legislators to encourage them to support increased funding.

**Role of TECS**: Should town energy committees (TECs) be promoting the program with the long waiting list?

* Certainly, they should provide information about the program who they think might be eligible and encourage to check on their eligibility and get on the waiting list.

**Mobile homes:** high correlation between mobile home owners/renters and low-income. Woodstock energy group has developed and offered a special workshop for mobile home owners on weatherization measures.

* Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity’s Mobile Home Project has developed a guide for weatherizing mobile homes. Can be found at: <http://www.cvoeo.org/fileLibrary/file_56.pdf>

**Transportation**: is a key issue for low-income Vermonters – especially for the rural poor where their livelihood depends on it.

Sustain-a-raisers is a program in Massachusetts run by Global Awareness-Local Action that utilizes volunteers to help individuals improve their sustainability -- <http://galacommunity.org/what-we-do/sustain-a-raisers>.