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Amy S. Anthony: Put U.S. energy-efficiency funds to work

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By Amy S. Anthony



With Rhode Island’s unemployment rate at nearly 13 percent, one of the highest of any state, it’s particularly disappointing that the state has left most of the \$20 million in [federal stimulus](#) money for energy-efficiency weatherization jobs untapped.

The state needs to move aggressively to create these jobs, and it should choose large-scale projects to get the greatest bang for the buck.

Last year, Congress and the Obama administration enacted a stimulus package that dedicated \$5 billion to make energy improvements to low-income families’ homes through the federal Weatherization Assistance Program. Weatherizing homes in “shovel-ready” projects is a great job stimulus tool and one of the most efficient ways to get people working in the shortest time. In 2003, the U.S. Department of Energy estimated that every \$1 million invested in weatherization creates 52 new jobs — often in struggling, low-income communities. Unfortunately, the state has let administrative problems hold up the money.

Rhode Island is one of only five states to report zero new units weatherized with the stimulus money in the year since it has been available, according to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Inspector General’s recent status report on the program. The report called the low spending rates by Rhode Island and other lagging states “alarming.” The state’s slow pace means that low-income families pay more than they should on their utilities, while unemployed workers in the building trades are missing the chance to earn paychecks.

Historically, the weatherization program has focused on single-family homes. It has helped some 6 million families since the program’s creation, in 1976. The stimulus funding is a 20-fold funding increase over previous

years. Rhode Island received \$20 million, enough to improve 3,000 homes at \$6,500 a unit, but there's a deadline of March 2012 to use this money or lose it. We should still weatherize single-family homes, but the key to using the available resources within the time allotted is working at scale by adding large multi-family housing complexes into the program to maximize job creation and get the money flowing faster.

Many affordable apartments were built before 1980 with little concern for energy performance, making them prime candidates for cost-effective rehabilitation. The 72-unit Cherry Hill Apartments for senior citizens, in Johnston, is a perfect example. We have already invested in preliminary design and engineering work and we could have workers on the site in weeks if we could just get the stimulus funding.

The Obama administration has primed the pump for the states to create jobs in the new and growing green economy, both with funding and by lifting bureaucratic barriers that had made it difficult for the owners of federally assisted multi-family apartments to participate in the weatherization program in the past. There is great potential for energy savings on a huge scale if states use this money to weatherize the hundreds of thousands of affordable multi-family units across America. The Energy Foundation recently estimated that tenants and owners of multi-family housing in the U.S. could reap a \$9 billion annual "energy dividend" from energy-efficiency investments.

In addition to saving money, weatherizing multi-family housing communities on a large scale can reduce our carbon footprint and promote American energy independence. The U.S. Green Building Council has estimated that in 2008, homes, offices and other buildings accounted for 38 percent of the U.S. annual carbon-dioxide emissions, contributing to climate change more than any other sector of the economy.

Rhode Island has made some promising steps toward realizing these opportunities, setting aside 30 percent of the \$20 million for multi-family housing. Just recently, the state moved to administer this money through Rhode Island Housing, the state housing-finance agency. We encourage the state to move quickly to implement this administrative change. Through the set-aside, the state is acknowledging that multi-family-housing units are a unique part of the program, worthy of special attention. Energy-efficiency retrofits in multi-family housing (such as re-engineering boilers) will require workers with specific skills in multi-family units different from the single-family sector, but the large-scale savings that will be accrued make it worth the investment.

The state shouldn't waste any more time. Officials should run interference on any time-consuming turf battles and push the process forward. Moreover, the state should develop a contingency plan to promptly redirect additional funds to multi-family housing if the federally sourced funds might otherwise be lost.

Amy S. Anthony is president, founder and executive director of the non-profit Preservation of Affordable Housing, which owns 700 affordable-housing units in Rhode Island. She was secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Communities and Development from 1983 to 1990, when she supervised the Massachusetts Weatherization Assistance Program.