

From Underserved to Advocate: Learning from a Historically Non-participating Rural Community

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ABSTRACT

Wisconsin's statewide energy efficiency and renewable energy program, FOCUS ON ENERGY®, used a research-based approach to identify high-need, historically non-participating communities, and provided residents with whole home weatherization. The Home Energy Upgrades Pilot served three communities with high energy burdens and low prior engagement, the first was rural Black River Falls. Through research with local advocates and community-based partners, Focus on Energy gained insights into community preferences, communication styles, and the barriers residents encounter when considering home energy upgrades. Community partners played a central role in helping participants understand, access, and enroll in services—bridging trust gaps and removing participation barriers. Throughout implementation, the team analyzed housing baselines, savings potential, and feedback from participants and community partners. This paper presents results from Black River Falls and key findings related to energy saving opportunities, community partner engagement, and participant barriers to support implementers seeking to increase participation in underserved areas of their service territories.

Introduction

The Home Energy Upgrades Pilot (pilot) provided free weatherization services to interested homeowners and renters in rural Black River Falls, Wisconsin. The pilot served low- and moderate-income residents and was designed to address Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC) orders directing Focus on Energy to better identify and reach underserved populations—particularly those facing the highest energy burdens¹ (Public Service Commission of Wisconsin 2022). Focus on Energy completed its underserved research in early 2024. This research looked at geographic gaps in Focus on Energy participation, assessed the demographic and socioeconomic attributes common to those areas, and evaluated how those attributes correspond to established definitions of vulnerable populations.

This research identified communities exhibiting low Focus on Energy program activity, defined as falling into the bottom quartile (25%) per capita in number of residential projects, total incentives, or total energy savings per household. The team then combined this program data with demographic and socioeconomic data including Wisconsin-based community-based organization survey data, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Justice40 Initiative data on Disadvantaged Communities, the Council on Environmental Quality Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, DOE Low-Income Energy Affordability Data, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) data, and American Community Survey data. This led to the development of the Communities of Focus framework. Community of Focus criteria, listed below, were selected because they indicate high need (e.g., high energy

¹ The PSC did not define energy burden in their orders. The pilot selected communities based on having an energy burden in the top 10% of census tracts in the state. For Black River Falls, this was an average 4.17% across target census tracts (DOE Low-Income Energy Affordability Tool).

burden, high SVI score) or were identified as potential barriers that prevent communities from having meaningful engagement with Focus on Energy (e.g., high share of renters). Census tracts that fall in the top decile (10%) of at least one of the seven key indicators are considered a “Community of Focus” (Steigauf et al. 2024).

- High energy burden/costs
- High share of low-moderate income population
- High share of renter population
- High share of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) population
- High share of limited English-speaking population
- High share of population with limited internet access
- High SVI scores

The team analyzed the underlying dataset and recommended communities where (1) at least two of three metrics indicating low participation were present (0-25th percentile of total projects, spend, or savings), and (2) at least one of the “Communities of Focus” criteria were in the top 10% in the state. The team also reviewed communities to ensure the local utilities participate in Focus on Energy, there was sufficient contractor coverage (at least one weatherization company within a 30-mile radius), and there was sufficient population to support recruitment (at least 3,000 residents). The Focus on Energy team identified Black River Falls as the first of three communities to serve based on:

- **Underserved status** – The majority of census tracts fell into the 0-25th percentile of Focus on Energy participation in terms of total number of projects and incentives per population, and half of relevant census tracts fell into the 0-25th percentile for total savings per population (the other half were in the 26-50th percentile).
- **Communities of Focus criteria** – The majority of relevant census tracts were in the top 10% of the state in terms of energy burden.
- **Other considerations** – Black River Falls is considered rural (Wisconsin Department of Health Services 2024), and the percentage of Community of Focus criteria, while not in the top 10%, were relatively high in terms of: (1) population with area median income (AMI) of 80% or lower, (2) number of renters, and (3) CDC SVI score.

Black River Falls is a small city in Western Wisconsin with a population of about 3,500 residents and a median household income of \$66,632 (United States Census Bureau 2024). Local housing stock is relatively aged, with more than half of the homes built before 1960 (Meitus 2017). Approximately 70% of its 1,702 housing units are single-family detached homes, with 38% of occupants being renters (United States Census Bureau 2024).

Black River Falls is the county seat for rural Jackson County. Even though it is a small town, it has a thriving downtown and rich community life. Once the team got a foothold and started creating relationships, key contacts were generous in making warm introductions to other community leaders. The pilot quickly established a base of community partners that provided 100% of leads needed to meet the goal for units served. From this strong base of support, word of mouth grew. The pilot created key learnings for Focus on Energy and successfully deployed a design that reached an underserved, rural area using a community-based approach.

Research Scope and Methods

In the planning phase, before fieldwork began, the team interviewed three contractors, staff at eight community-based organizations, and three stakeholder organizations. The interviews were critical in recruiting support for the pilot, helping the team better understand the community, and informing the messages and tactics to reach potential participants.

The pilot team used a combination of in-person and phone-based interviews during the planning phase, with the majority conducted via recorded video calls for ease of data collection and analysis. The pilot team used a consistent questionnaire, but also allowed the conversation to flow naturally, at times going into more detail or including follow-up questions on topics covered.

The participating contractor and five community partners sat for post-participation interviews. The team also conducted research on the experiences of participants using two different methods. Shortly after the contractor completed work, the team surveyed participants using a nine-question anonymous online questionnaire to learn more about their experience. At least 30 days post project completion, the team conducted longer phone interviews with 18 participants (46% of the total) to learn more about topics including previous barriers to weatherization, ability to pay for services, and demographic and housing details.

Pilot Design

Participant Eligibility

The pilot primarily served households between 60% and 80% AMI. The pilot targeted this income range because of a gap in the financial support available to lower- and moderate-income residents based on offerings currently in the market including Focus on Energy programs and the DOE's Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP).

Outside of the pilot, Focus on Energy provides enhanced incentives for heating and cooling and insulation and air sealing upgrades for participants at or below 80% AMI. While these incentives are higher than standard rebate amounts, stakeholder feedback has indicated incentives are not significant enough to overcome first-cost barriers for the target income range. These rebates can be combined with Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) incentives available through the Home Efficiency Rebates (HOMES) program. Projects receiving both types of funding may still require out-of-pocket spending depending on the measures or contractor selected and percentage savings reduction achieved.

The DOE's WAP also operates in Wisconsin, using a combination of DOE, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and state Public Benefits funding administered by the Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources (DEHCR) (DEHCR 2026). WAP offers fully funded home weatherization services through community action agencies, tribal governments, community-based organizations, and housing authorities for households with income at or below 60% of State Median Income (SMI) (DEHCR 2026). The Home Energy Upgrades pilot filled this eligibility gap for the income eligible population who cannot qualify for fully funded services or afford to co-fund weatherization projects.

Community Partnerships

The pilot's stated target goal was to have 100% of leads come through community partners, so these relationships were critical to success. During start-up, the team conducted research and collaborated with the local utility, Black River Falls Municipal Utilities, to identify potential outreach partners. The team conducted eight community partner interviews to help inform pilot design, and gather input on the measure mix, outreach strategy, and partners best suited to meet community needs. These conversations were also essential for understanding each community partner's mission and how the pilot's energy efficiency services could complement and strengthen their existing work. Through this effort, the team engaged six community partners to perform outreach and lead intake for the pilot.

The pilot design included community partner participation incentives paid out of the total pilot budget. Community partners were eligible for incentives of \$200 per lead for each participant they referred who completed an assessment. Not all community partners who participated accepted payment for reasons that included cumbersome internal approval processes that made it difficult to get permission or complete the necessary paperwork.

Contractor Partnerships

Contractor support was equally important. There were no Focus on Energy-approved weatherization contractors located in Black River Falls, and despite connecting with several contractors located in the Western Wisconsin region, none were willing to participate. They cited driving distance and being busy with local customers as reasons for passing on the opportunity. One contractor located nearly two hours away from Black River Falls ultimately agreed to participate. He was experienced in serving income eligible participants through Focus on Energy and the WAP for more than 20 years.

The contractor understood potential participants have many competing priorities and offered flexibility such as evening or weekend appointments. He was also comfortable providing participant education and explaining recommendations or health and safety issues. This was a critical skill given the participants' self-reported low awareness of energy efficiency and Focus on Energy. Choosing an experienced contractor with a history of serving income eligible participants helped the pilot achieve:

- High savings per project (average air leakage reduction of 32%),
- Strong project comprehensiveness (average of 10 measures per home), and
- High participant satisfaction scores (4.61/5 average response to the question: How would you rate your experience participating in the pilot? $n = 18$).

Incentive Structure

Participants received a free home energy assessment and no-cost direct installation measures, including smart or programmable thermostats, pipe insulation, aerators, smart power strips, and exterior door weatherization measures (sweeps and weatherstripping). The pilot also provided a range of no-cost weatherization upgrades, such as air sealing, attic insulation, wall insulation, and duct sealing. Since the pilot focused on weatherization, the contractor referred qualified participants to other offerings, like WAP, for mechanical upgrade opportunities. There

was no limit on the total cost of energy improvements covered by Focus on Energy for each participating home.

The pilot covered up to \$1,000 in health and safety measures including ventilation fans, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, mold remediation, pest abatement, and vermiculite and asbestos remediation. Offering funding for health and safety or non-energy-saving measures unlocked projects that might not have moved forward without this funding. Older homes, especially those with deferred maintenance, have higher needs and health and safety issues that must be addressed for weatherization to proceed.

Participant Journey

Community partners recruited participants and initiated the intake process. To support community partner recruitment efforts, the team provided training and jointly branded, customized flyers for each organization. Community partners experimented with multiple outreach approaches and tactics, with email campaigns, social media posts, and in-person outreach being the most popular. Focus on Energy also supported community partners in crafting messaging for communications including newspaper ads, newsletter blurbs, bill inserts, social media posts, and email campaigns.

Interested applicants contacted their community partner's point person, who collected contact details, home information, income eligibility status, and utility account data. To keep the participation burden low, potential participants self-attested to their income eligibility, the pilot did not require documentation. The partner entered all information into a secure platform and Focus on Energy staff then verified it and shared it with the contractor who scheduled an assessment and performed approved weatherization work.

Key Research Findings: Opportunities and Results

Black River Falls was a rich target in energy-saving potential. The baseline was older homes that had not been weatherized and had strong savings opportunities for building shell measures (air sealing, and attic and wall insulation) and mechanical upgrades. Many participants had older furnaces, central air conditioners, and water heaters.

Understanding the characteristics of the homes served through the pilot provides essential context for interpreting both the energy impacts achieved and the broader benefits delivered to participants. This section outlines the baseline conditions observed, the resulting energy savings, and reported non-energy benefits.

Savings Opportunities

The pilot served 44 housing units in Black River Falls, which included 32 single-family homes, 2 duplexes, 3 manufactured homes, and 1 multi-family building with 5 units. The average home served in Black River Falls was built in 1939 and was 1,440 square feet. Participants were mostly homeowners (74%) and a little more than a quarter were renters (26%). Nearly every home had a natural gas furnace except the multi-family building which was electrically heated and one home that used delivered fuel (propane). The average age for natural gas furnaces in the available data was 12.4 years and 28% of furnaces were 15 years old or older ($n = 25$). For air conditioning ($n = 37$), 57% of participants had central air conditioning, 35% had window air

conditioners, and 8% had no home cooling. The average age for central air conditioners was 14.5 years in the available data ($n = 13$) and 6.25 years for window air conditioners ($n = 8$).

Most homes, 55%, had electric tank water heaters, 39% had natural gas tank water heaters, and 6% fell into the “other” category (tankless or heat pump water heaters) ($n = 36$). The average age of water heaters of all types was 10.6 years, falling within the DOE’s 10–15-year life expectancy for storage water heaters (U.S. Department of Energy 2026).

The participating contractor reported attic insulation was the primary weatherization measure needed in the homes he assessed. All assessments (100%) recommended air sealing and attic insulation, and 89% recommended wall insulation. The contractor reported that many homes had little to no wall insulation, and if any was present, it was “minimal or degraded.” The average existing R-value for attic insulation was low at R-11. The pilot also achieved a high average air sealing reduction (32%), showing that, prior to participation, most home envelopes were leaky.

Lighting savings opportunities, though not a part of the pilot, were present, with many homes having incandescent lighting or compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) able to be converted to light-emitting diode (LED) bulbs.

Energy Impacts

The pilot included 432 measures, all installed at no cost to participants. Projects averaged 10 measures per home across categories including weatherization, direct installation, and health and safety. The pilot spent \$329,905 on these projects and earned 40.5 kilowatts (kW) of peak demand savings, 50,893 in first year kilowatt hour (kWh) savings, and 8,633 in first year therm savings. Weatherization measures represented 87% of kWh savings, 89% of therm savings, and 86% of the total budget. Direct installation measures represented 13% of kWh savings, 11% of therm savings, and 3% of the budget. Health and safety measures did not earn savings and represented 10% of the budget. The average project cost was \$8,500 with an average first-year savings of 1,300 kWh and 220 therms. Table 1 provides a summary of measures installed in the 39 total projects (the five-unit multi-family building is counted as one project here).

Table 1. Pilot measure summary

Measure name	Total installed	% of projects with measure installed
Advanced power strip	76	85%
Air sealing	37	95%
Attic insulation	35	90%
Domestic hot water pipe insulation	34	51%
Door weatherstripping	54	77%
Door sweep	55	77%
Duct sealing	2	5%
Faucet aerator	34	62%
Foundation insulation	7	18%
Health and safety – exhaust fan	26	64%
Health and safety – carbon monoxide or smoke detector or combination unit	80	92%

Measure name	Total installed	% of projects with measure installed
Health and safety – miscellaneous	15	31%
Sill box insulation	11	28%
Smart thermostat	2	5%
Wall insulation	30	77%

Air sealing and insulation were the most common weatherization measures completed. The average reduction in air loss was 32% (measured pre- and post-project as cubic feet per minute at 50 pascals [CFM50] reduced using a blower door). The average air sealing project saved 71 first-year therms and 187 kWh. For attic insulation, the average project saved 137 first-year therms and 259 kWh.

The pilot spent an average of \$820 on health and safety per participant, out of the available \$1,000 per home. The biggest spending category was kitchen and bath exhaust fans, which are often necessary for proper ventilation when tightening the building envelope (which the pilot did in 95% of projects).

The second biggest category was “miscellaneous” health and safety costs, which the contractor used to cover project costs outside of energy-saving measures. The pilot paid these funds out at a \$60 hourly rate primarily for upgrades like adding attic access (hatches or cutting into knee walls) or vapor barriers for crawlspace insulation. The pilot also provided free smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors as a standard health and safety measure, installing an average of two per participant.

Non-energy Benefits

In post-participation surveys, 31% of respondents reported lower energy bills, with one participant sharing their bill decreased by nearly 70% in one month. The remaining 69% said they were unsure of bill impacts ($n = 16$). Only a short time had elapsed between the time the contractor completed projects (mostly in spring and summer of 2025) and participant interviews. None of the respondents had lived with improvements through a full heating season. These factors likely influenced the high percentage of “unsure” responses.

Of the respondents ($n = 16$), 88% reported increased comfort within their home. Other non-energy benefits reported included less draftiness, better temperature control, increased warmth on cool days, better cooling on warm days, and shorter run times for furnaces and air conditioners.

Key Research Findings: Participant Barriers and Motivators

Understanding why participants chose to enroll—and what initially held them back—offers insight into how programs can effectively reach underserved households. During interviews, participants shared the following about their motivations and prior barriers:

- “We didn't know about it...if we had more money in the bank we would have done it long ago.”
- [Prior to participating] “We got an energy efficient water heater and furnace, but only when we absolutely needed to replace them.”

- “I knew they [the upgrades] would be helpful in lowering my energy bill but just couldn't justify paying all that up front without knowing for sure that it would work.”

This section highlights findings from participant and community partner interviews about the barriers residents faced and the motivators that led them to enroll.

Participation Barriers

In the pre-participation interviews, community partners shared a range of responses to the question: “What are top barriers for your clients pursuing energy projects?” (Figure 1). For many, they are simply not aware of energy efficiency and Focus on Energy or similar programs. Community partners also reported trust issues, which can include discomfort with having contractors in their homes or a lack of trust in institutions.

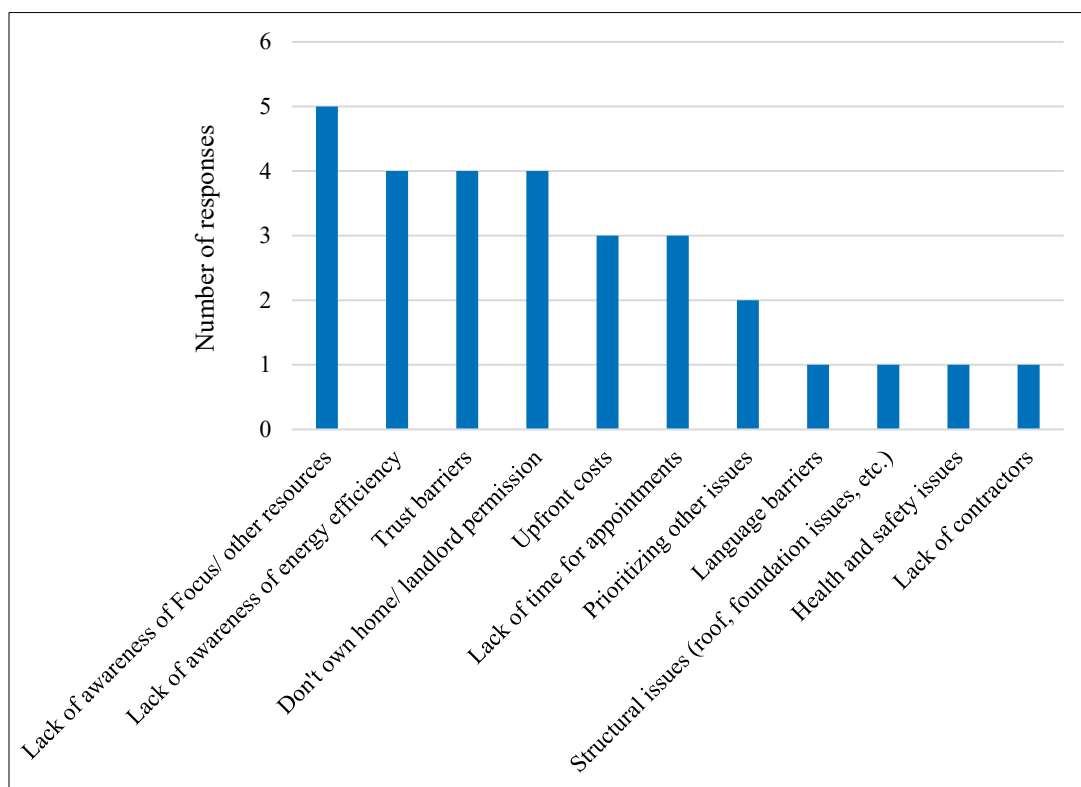


Figure 1. Community partner reported top barriers to completing energy efficiency projects by number of responses.

Interviews revealed participants were not likely to know about or pursue energy efficiency upgrades without support. Only one participant ($n = 18$) responded affirmatively to the question, “Have you ever considered getting a home energy upgrade through a contractor or as a do-it-yourself project?” The respondent who had considered it shared they did not follow through because cost was a barrier. When asked what kept them from pursuing home energy upgrades in the past, respondents ($n = 13$) shared high upfront costs (80%), lack of knowledge about energy-saving measures or technologies (30%), or being a renter (10%) were the primary barriers.

Affordability barrier: When asked how much they would be willing or able to pay for home energy upgrades (Figure 2), 25% of participants said up to \$500, 12.5% said \$500 or more, and 62.5% said that they could not contribute toward the services at all. Given the high cost of home weatherization work (many thousands of dollars), it is not likely that these participants would have completed a project without support from a free or very low-cost program.

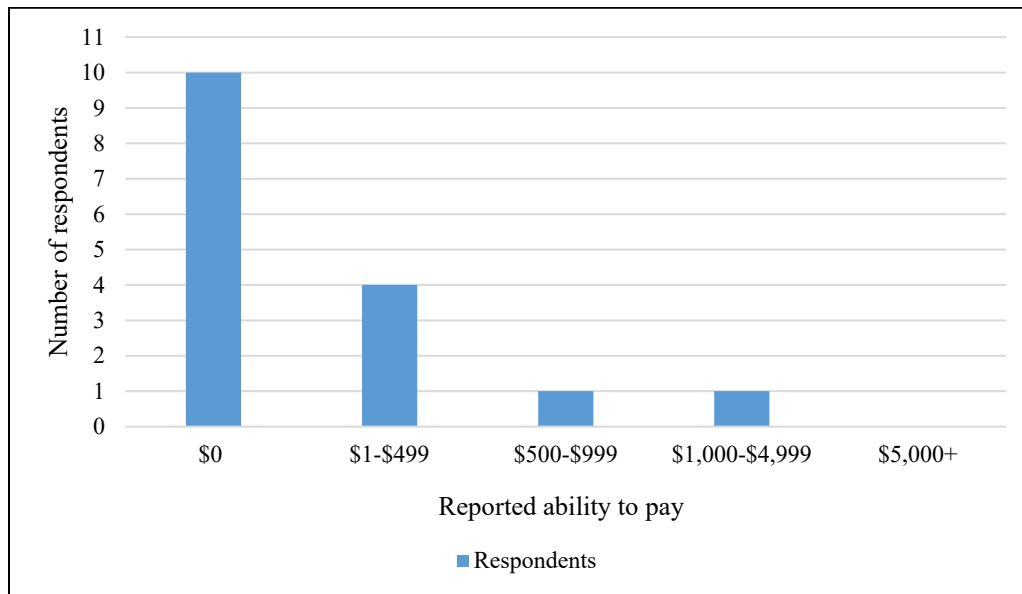


Figure 2. Participant self-reported ability to contribute financially for services ($n = 16$).

Awareness barrier: The majority of respondents (59%) ($n = 17$) responded negatively to the question, “Have you ever seen or heard of home energy upgrades like the ones completed at your home?” Only 18% responded “yes” when asked whether they had participated in Focus on Energy prior ($n = 17$). In initial interviews, three community partners out of eight reported that their clientele were taking steps to improve their energy efficiency independently, and of these, only low or no-cost tactics were mentioned (e.g., putting plastic over windows or stuffing gaps under exterior doors).

Trust barrier: Interviewees consistently shared that trust barriers were an obstacle to participation. Concerns about scams and the perception the pilot is “too good to be true” came up in post interviews with participants and in pre and post interviews with community partners and the contractor. Two of the community partners shared that older adults specifically were more skeptical than other age groups and cited fear of scams.

Landlord/tenant barrier: Landlord/tenant issues came up repeatedly in the post-participation interviews. Rental housing can be more difficult to serve because multiple people are involved, landlord permission is required to move forward with weatherization projects, and the relationship between landlords and tenants can be adversarial. Landlords and tenants also have a split incentive to participate. Most energy-saving benefits accrue to the tenant instead of the landlord as more than 70% of U.S. renters pay their own heating bills (EIA 2020).

Motivators

When inquiring about their primary motivations for participating in the pilot, respondents were given multiple prompts to classify as “key factors,” “contributing factors,” or “irrelevant” (Figure 3). Respondents ($n = 18$) could share more than one response in each category. The top options listed as “key factors” were (1) it was free (100%), (2) the benefits were important (83%), and (3) a trusted organization was involved with the pilot (78%).

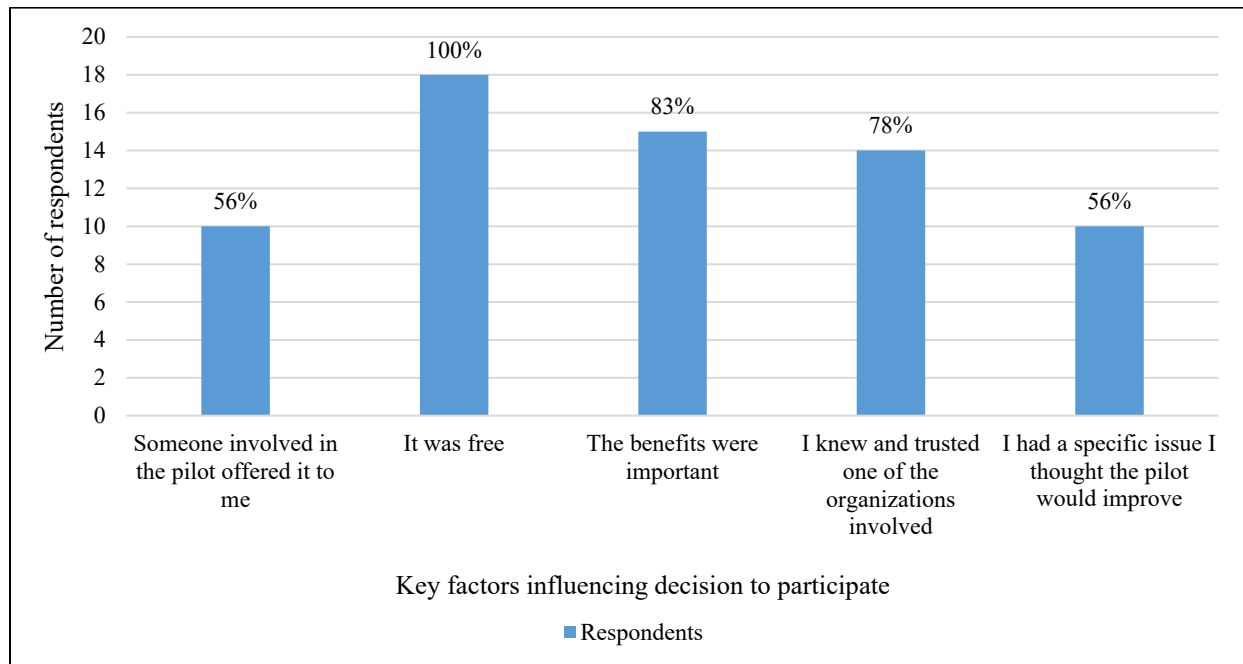


Figure 3. Self-reported key factors influencing participation by number and percentage of respondents.

Using direct community partner outreach and offering services for free were important in the pilot reaching an underserved, rural audience. Self-reported low ability to pay combined with 100% of respondents sharing that free services were a “key factor” motivating their participation show the importance of offering services at low or no cost in reaching this population.

Participant data showed community partners leading outreach helped overcome trust and awareness barriers. Participants reported low awareness of Focus on Energy and energy efficiency concepts in general. Of survey respondents, 78% rated the statement “I knew and trusted one of the organizations involved” as a key motivation to participate. They also shared this feedback in their own words:

- “It was very important that it came directly from the school. If I had gotten the same email from someone I didn't know I would have thought it was a scam. But the school social worker vouched for it, so I trusted it.”
- “It was very important that it was the utility [that told me about this] as I trust them. They told us exactly what they could do to make it more efficient and that's what they did.”

Key Research Findings: Community Partnerships and Outreach Tactics

As trusted members of the community, community partners can connect with, reach, and serve participants in ways that inherently consider and overcome unique barriers. Finding fit was a necessary first step toward a successful partnership. Prior to onboarding, Focus on Energy worked with partners to understand their mission and find ways for energy efficiency services to complement their current work in the community. The team also established compensation of \$200 per lead to make sure partners' contributions and time were recognized.

Community partners were central to the pilot's outreach strategy, shaping how information reached residents and how trust was built within the community. This section summarizes the community partners' core services, the outreach methods they employed, and the recruitment barriers they encountered while engaging Black River Falls residents.

Community Partners

The pilot identified potential partners through research and warm introductions from community leaders. The team then trained partners on outreach and the intake process, often co-creating solutions that would work for both sides. In Black River Falls, the pilot partnered with:

- **Aging and Disabilities Resource Center of Jackson County (ADRCJC)** – A division of Jackson County Health and Human Services, they provide public benefits access (energy assistance and WAP referrals), and services for people with disabilities and older adults.
- **Aptiv, Inc.** – A non-profit that provides support services for people with disabilities including employment assistance, skill development, residential support, and assistive technology.
- **Black River Falls Municipal Utilities** – A non-profit, community-owned, public power utility providing electric, water, and sewer services.
- **Black River Falls School District** – A social worker/homeless liaison within the district was actively engaged with the pilot. She supports families in accessing available benefits.
- **Boys and Girls Club of the Greater Chippewa Valley** – The local branch of a national non-profit providing after-school programming, youth development, and nutritious meals for children ages 2-18.
- **Red Cross – Southwest Wisconsin Chapter** – regional chapter of a national non-profit providing disaster relief and prevention services.

Figure 4 illustrates the core services provided by each participating partner. Success was found with organizations that provided direct services to people and understood their housing situations, even if those organizations did not have prior knowledge of energy efficiency.

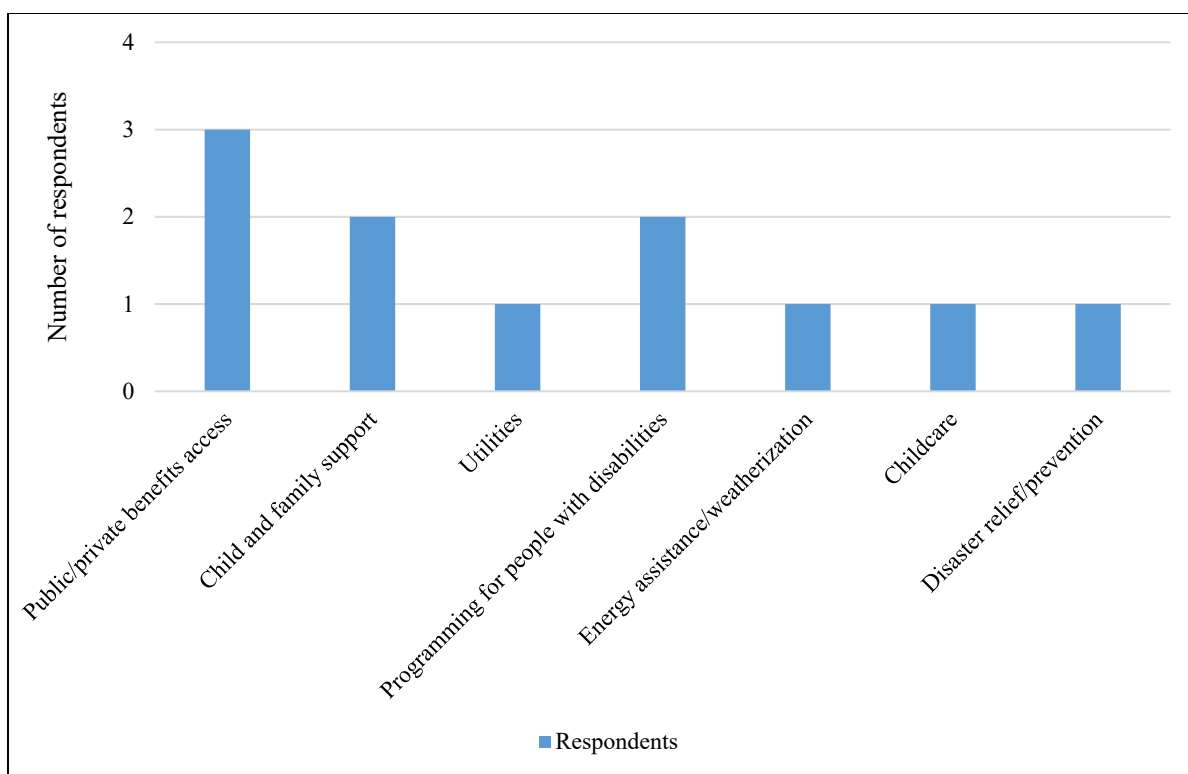


Figure 4. Core services provided by participating community partners.

Lead Generation

The partners provided 41 total leads, helping the pilot exceed the participation goal (44 of the 30-unit goal or 147%). In post participation interviews, partners reported good success in reaching potential participants. Every partner-generated lead that went on to have an assessment could earn the organization \$200. Community partners reported ($n = 4$) they liked and appreciated this approach. All respondents shared a positive response to the question “Did the referral payment make it easier for your organization to dedicate staff time to the pilot?”

The most successful lead generators were organizations with deep, direct connections to local residents—particularly those who regularly provided family-supporting services and understood clients’ housing situations. This was true even if they had little prior experience with energy efficiency and did not work on housing-related issues. The local utility generated the highest number of leads, followed by the school district and the Boys and Girls Club, all of which had broad reach and access to large pools of potential participants. For example, the utility and school district maintained contact information for all or many families in town, and the Boys and Girls Club served more than 120 members and over 50 families annually. These organizations also had insight into which households might benefit most: the utility targeted customers receiving bill assistance, and the school social worker used her personal knowledge of families’ housing situations to conduct targeted outreach.

In contrast, CBOs generating fewer leads tended to have smaller networks in Black River Falls and lacked a local brick and mortar presence in the community. The Red Cross produced no leads, largely because disaster relief deployments took core volunteers out of state for extended periods and their primary point of contact was located outside the community. Aptiv was headquartered outside of Black River Falls and relied solely on outreach to its immediate

network of staff and clients. The Aging and Disabilities Resource Center of Jackson County provided referrals only for individuals who contacted them but were over income for energy assistance and the WAP. Figure 5 illustrates the number of leads by community partner.

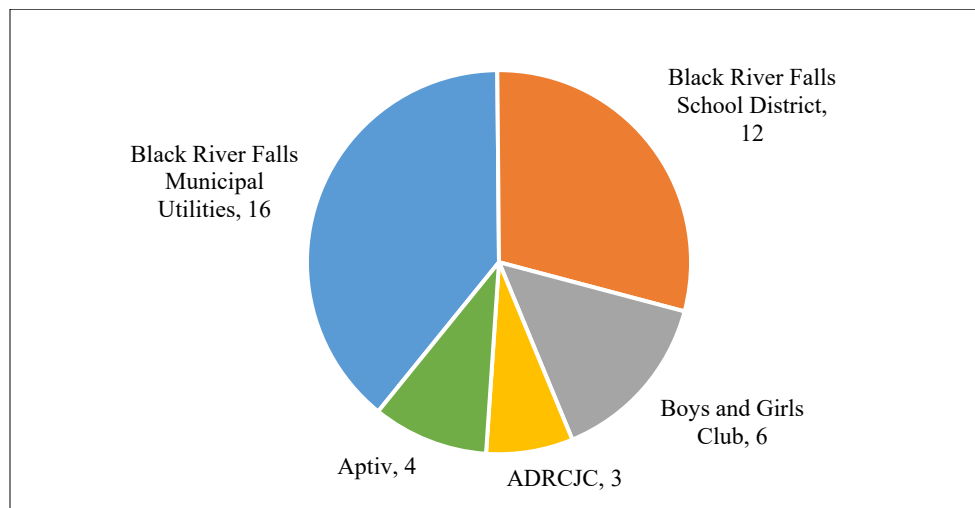


Figure 5. Number of referrals by community partner.

Outreach Methods

Community partners used a variety of methods to reach potential participants, with email, in-person recruitment, and flyers being the most popular tactics. In-person outreach, email campaigns, and the utility bill insert were the most effective in terms of overall leads provided. Figure 6 includes all the methods community partners self-reported using ($n = 6$).

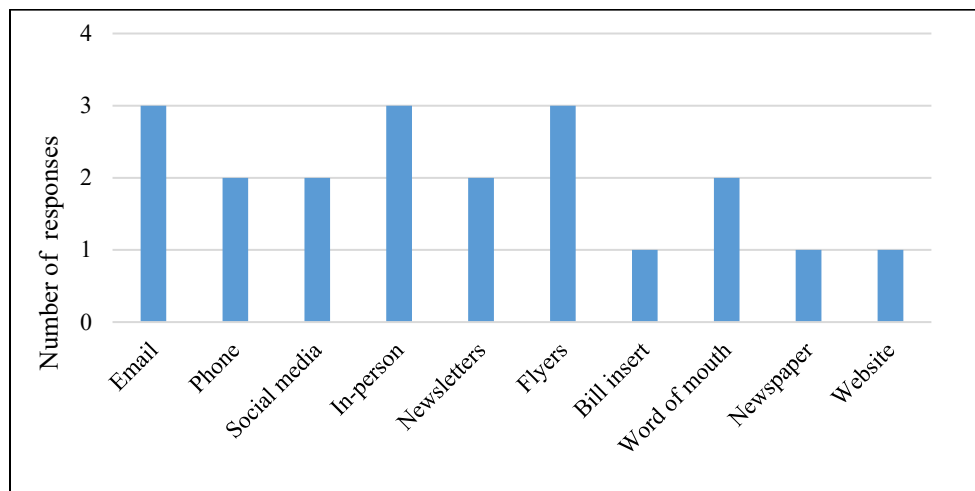


Figure 6. Outreach methods used by number of community partner responses.

Most community partners reported being happy with the outreach methods they chose. The Boys and Girls Club, school district social worker, and local utility scrubbed their data to find participants likely to be eligible and interested and made initial outreach attempts via email. They reported this was both effective and low effort for them. The local utility reported the bill

insert was a good means to reach the older adult population in town. Labeling at the utility open house was the largest single lead-generating effort, demonstrating the high potential of in-person outreach.

Organizations that were successful in reaching many participants also tried multiple recruitment tactics. For example, the school district used newsletters, social media, and call and email campaigns. The local utility placed a newspaper ad, created social media posts, hung flyers at the local library, completed email campaigns, facilitated in-person outreach, and sent out a bill insert. The Boys and Girls Club sent out emails to target participants, put a blurb in the Chamber of Commerce weekly newsletter, passed out flyers during an event, and posted about the pilot on social media.

Recruitment Challenges

Community partners reported that trust barriers were the biggest challenge to their outreach, with older adults in particular expressing heightened skepticism and fear of scams. Additional barriers—such as landlord-tenant dynamics, the need for landlord permission, and sometimes tense relationships—made rental housing more difficult to serve. The school district's social worker also noted poor housing conditions, including unsafe environments or “collector homes” where contractors could not safely perform an assessment prevented them from referring an estimated 20% of otherwise eligible households.

Simple lack of awareness of energy efficiency and Focus on Energy also took time for partners to overcome. The Boys and Girls Club Director shared, “people didn’t know what it was, but when we explained it, they understood.” This feedback mirrors participant interview data ($n = 17$); 59% reported never having heard of energy upgrades like the ones completed at their homes prior to participating in the pilot.

Conclusion

Feedback from participants and community partners revealed clear answers to the question, what does it take to design an effective, equitable, and community-centered program? These insights highlight the importance of trusted messengers, simple and accessible program structures, and thoughtful support for both participants and the organizations serving them. Together, they point to several key lessons to guide future program design and strengthen outcomes:

- **Build the program around trusted messengers, not just marketing channels.** Make community partner-led outreach a core feature. Equip partners with simple scripts, materials, and referral pathways, and involve them early in the design process to benefit from their expertise and ensure outreach fits naturally into their day-to-day work.
- **Prioritize community partners with strong relational networks and a direct presence in the community.** The most effective partners were those who already knew residents personally and had a physical presence in the community, not necessarily those with energy efficiency expertise.
- **Select community partners residents already view as credible, familiar, and safe.** Trust barriers—especially among older adults and households wary of scams—were a major obstacle. Trusted and well-known local organizations were able to overcome skepticism that would have stopped participation entirely.

- **Choose community partners with the reach and communication infrastructure to engage residents through multiple touchpoints.** The highest performing partners used layered outreach including email, newsletters, social media, and in-person events. Partners with limited local presence or small networks struggled to generate leads.
- **Provide compensation and ongoing support to motivate and sustain partner engagement.** Regular check-ins help partners plan and execute multiple outreach methods, and compensation acknowledges the time and effort required to participate.
- **Select contractors with strong communication skills and a track record of reliable service.** Contractors who are experienced in serving low- and moderate-income participants and who understand housing conditions are better positioned to explain the value of upgrades and support a positive participation experience. Even better if they are able to work around participant schedules and offer evening and weekend appointments.
- **Assume extremely low awareness and design for simplicity and clarity.** Most participants had never heard of energy efficiency upgrades or considered doing them on their own. Use plain language materials and simple explanations of benefits to support community partner outreach and participant understanding.
- **Make the program free or very low cost to reach the intended audience.** High upfront costs were one of the biggest reported barriers, and most respondents reported very low or no ability to pay. All survey respondents reported that free services were a “key factor” in their decision to participate, demonstrating just how critical free services were in reaching the target population.
- **Include funding for health and safety measures.** Many homes require repairs before weatherization can proceed or non-energy-saving measures like smoke detectors or kitchen or bath ventilation fans to leave the home in a safe condition. Covering these costs ensures the program is accessible and flexible enough to serve most eligible households.

Taken together, these lessons offer a practical roadmap for designing future initiatives that are more accessible, more trusted, and more responsive to the communities they aim to serve.

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