

ECOADVOCATES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PILOT PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Slipstream

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I.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EcoAdvocates Community Engagement pilot program is a collaboration of Slipstream and Faith in Place developed in response to ComEd's 2018 Call for Ideas to improve program delivery in the income eligible (IE) sector. The program uses a community organizing model overseen by an influential community partner to increase IE customer participation in energy efficiency offerings.

At the heart of the program are the EcoAdvocates, local residents hired and managed by Faith in Place to build one-on-one relationships with their neighbors and fellow community members. Through repeated interactions, the EcoAdvocates educate, engage, and overcome barriers of awareness and trust to facilitate customers' participation in energy efficiency programs and behavior. The program also serves as a job training and workforce development initiative. EcoAdvocates receive training, oversight, mentorship, and career counseling throughout the pilot to prepare them for permanent jobs in energy efficiency, or roles in other industries requiring similar competencies.

The program began in January 2019 and had five major phases: Program Design, Community Selection, EcoAdvocate Recruitment and Training, Customer Outreach and Enrollment, and Measurement and Verification.

The program sought to recruit and train EcoAdvocates in three communities to enroll 150 customers in the pilot. Each participant would receive a smart thermostat installed by local contractors; once operational, the data would be used to drive customer interaction, behavior change, and energy savings. Before commencing recruitment, this component was removed to focus only on customer engagement, education, and referrals to other energy efficiency offerings. Two communities, Waukegan in suburban Lake County and South Shore in Chicago, were selected based on factors that included demographics, housing stock, workforce development infrastructure, and existing community partnerships and relationships.

Eight candidates were hired as EcoAdvocates in the spring of 2019. A series of trainings covering professional and technical fundamentals were held in June and July. Concurrently, marketing materials and plans were developed, with final materials approved for distribution in September; major materials were translated in October to support outreach and enrollment in Spanish-speaking households.

EcoAdvocates attended over 100 community events, large and small, from September 2019-March 2020 and recruited 87 people into the program. They distributed 25 energy efficiency kits and assisted in scheduling 4 home energy assessments and two small business assessments.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that EcoAdvocates cease interactions with current and prospective participants. The program adjusted by prioritizing training and career planning for EcoAdvocates, allowing them to gain experience in various facets of community engagement, customer service, case work,

and nonprofit management. The EcoAdvocates also assisted other Faith in Place activities and programs.

The pilot resumed outreach and education efforts for a brief final period from August to mid-September 2020. Recognizing the significant strains facing many community members, we were allowed to expand these conversations beyond energy efficiency, to include topics and resources on bill assistance, nutrition, housing, and social isolation. This renewal of activity around salient issues, and the opportunity to support community needs, reinvigorated the EcoAdvocates' morale while achieving positive outcomes.

Major lessons learned from this pilot:

- **The "trusted advisor" model makes energy issues more accessible to community members, but creates challenges between parties**
Creating and delivering targeted communications can create conflict between community partner priorities and corporate standards. To be authentic and effective, grassroots approaches require flexibility and early consensus from partners.
- **Tailor the message, tactics, and tools to the audience and organizers**
People are more enthusiastic communicating a message over which they feel authorship. Provide flexibility while maintaining core standards. Select data tools and platforms simple and familiar to the organizer.
- **Timing of major design changes can be critical**
Once a team's expectations are set, making major changes can substantially impact morale and performance.
- **Community members can be effective messengers to overcome barriers; consistent and cumulative training is essential**
Training activities should parallel customer engagements. Focus first on sparking and documenting interest; evolve to more detailed program and technology topics.
- **Personal networks and direct communication are effective but limited**
Accommodate digital and social media approaches to increase reach and exposure.
- **Sustained engagement is essential to establish and maintain customer relationships**
Relationship-building is a long and labor-intensive process. The lengthy pause in communication during the pandemic-induced hiatus made customer re-engagement difficult.