

# Rochester safe homes initiative works to lower energy bills

In 2017, the City of Rochester released its Climate Action Plan with a goal to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent below 2010 levels by 2020—and an additional 40 percent by 2030. This aligns with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Clean Energy Program (CEP) goals to reduce statewide greenhouse gas emissions.

A recent United Nations report on climate change says that failing to curtail our carbon emissions within 12 years will lead to catastrophic storms, irreparable damage to crops, and loss of human life.

In 2015, the Office of the New York State Attorney General allocated \$1 million to Rochester from a court-ordered settlement for violations of the federal Clean Air Act. The money was designated to improve energy efficiency and weatherization for income-qualified city homeowners. According to the CEP, residences are the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions.

Rochester Safe and Efficient Homes Initiative (RSEHI) was convened by Rochester Area Community Foundation to collaborate with community partners and use this money to help low-income homeowners lower their energy bills and eliminate serious health and safety hazards in older homes.

Partners in this effort included Action for a Better Community, City of Rochester, Monroe County Department of Public Health, NeighborWorks Rochester, Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning, and PathStone Corporation. As key stakeholders in community development, housing remediation, environmental health, and weatherization, these partners have decades of related experience, successes, and technical expertise. Somewhat competitive, they had not necessarily worked together before.

Secondary partners—Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Monroe County Office on Aging, Common Ground Health, University of Rochester, and New York State Homes & Community Renewal—contributed by sharing best practices and information.

Homeowners applied to any of the partners to see if they qualified for



## VIEWPOINT

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grants or loans for improvements, such as insulation, furnaces, hot water heaters, new windows and doors, removal of lead paint hazards, or emergency repairs. If our partners were unable to pay for all the work themselves, proposals were forwarded to RSEHI for gap funding to ensure that those most in need received the necessary interventions. In some instances, grants helped eliminate barriers so homeowners could qualify for thousands of dollars in weatherization work.

Collectively, we have assisted over 200 low-income homeowners, invested nearly \$3 million worth of weatherization or health and safety improvements. Preliminary data show that homeowners we assisted are seeing an average 22 percent reduction in energy costs and more than 1,200 tons of carbon will be kept out of the atmosphere. Follow-up conversations found that 100 percent of clients with pre-existing respiratory conditions like asthma or COPD experienced significantly reduced symptoms.

Working together, our community has successfully reduced a toxic environmental health hazard that seemed insurmountable. In the past decade, Monroe County has seen an 80 percent reduction in the number of children reported with lead paint poisoning.

We can do the same with climate change. By taking steps to protect our environment, we are creating a healthier community in which to live, work, and play for all citizens. We just have to decide to do it. In the spirit of Susan B. Anthony (and the movie "Apollo 13"), "Failure is not an option."

*Elizabeth McDade is the program coordinator for the Rochester Safe and Efficient Homes Initiative and the program manager for the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning.*