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## UTILITY COMPANIES WORK TO REDUCE ENERGY COSTS

for Low Income Consumers



BY GLADYS SCHNEIDER

Florida is home to five investor-owned utility companies. Each in its own way provides energy conservation programs for its customers. In this article we spotlight one of them, Duke Energy, serving central and north Florida regions. The Neighborhood Energy Savers program (NES) is among several programs offered by the company and is managed by Melvin Philpot. I had the good fortune to tag along with the NES team as they carried out the program in Lake Wales, located in Polk County, southeast of Lakeland. It's a great way to get a hat and t-shirt and meet some amazing people helping low income households save money on their electric bill and contribute to energy conservation for the planet.

There are so many ways to conserve energy in our homes that we take the numerous products, rebates and incen-

tives for granted. Affordable housing developers design and equip homes, new or rehabbed, with energy-saving devices that keep our homes cooler, use less water, and result in real reductions in utility bills. What Duke Energy brings to its lower income consumers with NES is the benefit of energy conservation that may not otherwise be available to households that cannot afford higher cost items, such as solar hot water heaters, double paned windows or high rated insulation. This includes not only homeowners, but also renters. It's a win-win-Duke Energy helps its customers save on their electric bills which helps Duke Energy meet its goals to further energy conservation.

### HERE IS HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS:

The program is neighborhood based. Working with the Shimberg Center for Housing Studies, maps are made to identify census tracts down to block level data for lower



**MELVIN PHILPOT** is a Florida Housing Coalition past Chair and current board member and a leader in this model for many years. Based in Seminole County, Melvin manages the NES program and works with several other Duke Energy programs that sponsor weatherization efforts and energy education for affordable housing.

income households. Once an area is selected, all customers, whether rental or owner, single family or multifamily, mobile home or site built, will be invited to participate. Great efforts are made to reach out to the community, starting with elected officials and community leaders. A community event is held where everyone is invited to learn about the program. As we all know food brings people out- so a local restaurant will be asked to cater the event with scrumptious food. Then comes post cards, door hangers and appointments are set up.

This is where my field trip begins. I met Melvin Philpot in Lake Wales one cool morning (actually it was in the 90's) and we drove to the neighborhood where NES had been operating. Overall, NES hopes to complete 3,000 homes this year and at this point in June they were at 1,500 for Lake Wales and other communities. Overall, 26,000 homes have been completed with 76% of the homes invited participating. About 20 homes are completed each day with each visit taking only a half hour.

Box trucks and pickup trucks emblazoned with the NES logo lined the narrow streets in an older neighborhood in Lake Wales. NES guys in neon green T-shirts were busy knocking on doors, packing up kits from the trucks and moving supplies to the homes. The team has been doing this work for four and five years and are very experienced as well as enthusiastic about their jobs. To put it simply, Renee, Bernard and Anthony, told me “We just love doing this work. We know

how much we are helping people and they always are so appreciative.” Just then Melvin played a voice mail from his phone from a woman who called to say thank you and that she couldn't be happier. I have to believe that it's not just the devices they install for free and the instructions they give, but the friendly and respectful visit they make to homes that may infrequently receive visitors.

The tool kit is packed with devices and tools. Once inside, they fan out and go to work. Bernard wraps a hot water heater with insulation. Renee changes out the kitchen sink faucet with a spray nozzle and replaces the bathroom shower with a hand held spray that you can press a button and stop the water. Anthony uses a special brush to sweep the dust from underneath the fridge. Keeping the coils clean, he explained to the homeowner, will allow the fridge to operate more efficiently. The brush would be left behind for monthly use. The resident, who has been following along chatting with the team, is then shown how everything works and is given a calendar with colorful pictures of the devices with tips and instructions for saving energy every day of the year. She had her freezer set on the highest setting- Renee explained to her that the mid-point is just fine- once everything is frozen; a higher setting is not needed. If the setting is too low, the fridge will keep freezing over and over again, using more energy than necessary. He installs thermometers in the freezer and main section of the fridge. These tell the resident if the fridge is too warm or too cold, he explains to the resident. Bernard replaces a light switch

## 16 FREE ENERGY SAVING MEASURES:

Compact Florescent Bulbs (5 Per Home)

Hot Water Heater Wrap

Hot Water Heater Pipe Wrap

Hot Water Heater Temperature Check

Sink Faucet Aerators

Low Flow Shower Heads

Refrigerator Coil Brush

Refrigerator Thermometer

Switch Plate Wall Thermometer

HVAC Winter Kit for Window Units

Foam Insulation for Air Leaks

Caulking Around Windows, HVAC & Doors

Weather Stripping Around Windows, Doors and HVAC

Door Sweep for Two Exterior Doors

1-Year Supply A/C Filters, Change Filter

Energy Savings Tips Wall Calendar

cover with one that has a thermometer. This can be compared to the AC thermostat- if there is a big difference, the resident will know something isn't working. Renee installs up to five compact fluorescent light bulbs in the fixtures. Bernard checks the AC filters and notes the size on his checklist. A year's supply will be delivered once he puts in the order.

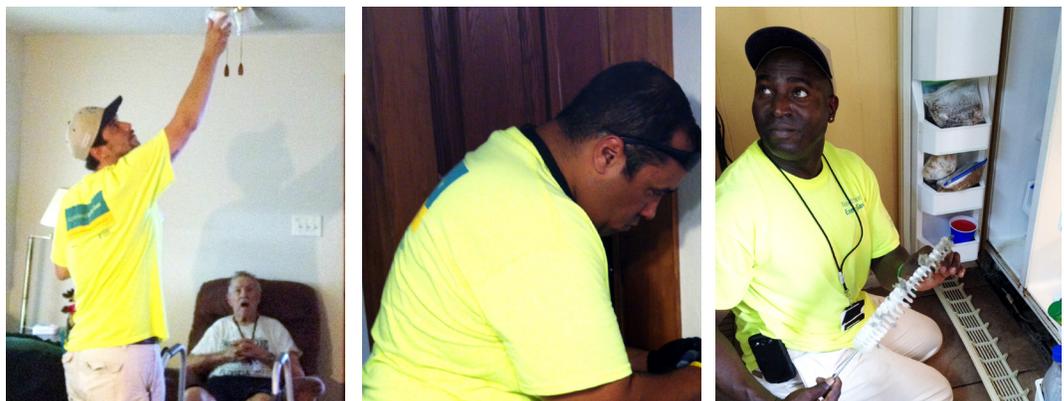
I had to ask, why the water saving devices from a power company? If you save hot water, you are saving energy. Clearly the team was very patient with me. So I persisted- what if you grab onto a faucet or some gadget and it falls apart in your hand? That doesn't happen they said, because they are so experienced they can tell by the make and model and condition if it's on its way out. They are proud that the items they install are made from high quality materials.

There are a total of 16 devices or treatments done. See the box at right for a list.

So what does this model program mean for Florida's housing providers? We learn that utility companies can open the way for all

of their customers to benefit from energy conservation. The Neighborhood Energy Savers program is just one part of their efforts. Duke Energy works with public housing authorities, USDA, housing nonprofits (ex. Tampa Bay Community Development Corporation), Habitat for Humanity, and Weatherization agencies. Keeping energy costs down results in lower housing costs, which is a common mission for all. The cost of the materials is not huge- other agencies can take note and service their current residents and former customers in the same way. The communication and contact keep community service in our work of increasing the supply of affordable housing accessible to all Floridians.

At the Florida Housing Coalition's annual conference this year, we feature the Energy and Utility Partners Caucus as well as workshops on building performance and energy efficiency. Join us. And if you want to have a fun day in the field, ask your energy company to ride shotgun to learn more about their programs for lower income customers. [HNN](#)



The NES team completes the energy savings visit in less than a half hour and shows the residents how they save on energy costs. (Left to Right) Renee is installing compact fluorescent light bulbs, Anthony installing a light switch cover with a thermometer, and Bernard explaining to the homeowner how to use the refrigerator coil sweeper.