



METROBRIDGE

MetroBridge Project Memo

To: Public Works Department, City of Chelsea

From: Urban Public Policy Lab Course, Political Science Department, Boston University

Date: May 2021

RE: Research findings on options for increasing uptake of home energy audits with a focus on rental properties

Introduction

In Spring 2021, Professor David Glick’s Urban Public Policy Lab course collaborated with Chelsea to help the city think through options for increasing the number of its residents’ homes that go through the MassSave home energy audit program. This program provides for free audits to improve residential energy efficiency. Audits often result in a mix of small and large upgrade proposals to make properties more energy efficient, comfortable, and inexpensive to live in. Many of the recommendations coming out of the audits are free or highly subsidized. At the time of the study, only around 11% of Chelsea households had made use of the program, a figure well below the average across the Commonwealth. This is concerning for several reasons. First, Chelsea residents are already funding MassSave services through their energy bills; it is a matter of equity that they should proportionately benefit from the program. Second, Massachusetts has embraced efficiency as a decarbonization strategy. Third, Chelsea is not alone; many of the challenges in Chelsea also apply to other cities—in particular the Commonwealth’s Gateway Cities.

Research Question & Methodology

Two teams, working independently, focused on the question, “what marketing or other affordable interventions should the city adopt to encourage use of the MassSave program?” The teams focused this way because the city does not run, nor can it change,

the program. However, it can try to get more of its residents to benefit from it. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, students could not visit Chelsea or interview homeowners and renters. This work relies primarily on secondary research from academic and policy focused literatures, and on related programs and efforts elsewhere. The students analyzed the MassSave program, focused on identifying barriers to adoption in Chelsea, and designed interventions to address those barriers.

Key Findings

Barriers to participation range from structural economic factors to limitations on awareness: Key obstacles to further uptake of MassSave include a lack of trust, language challenges, and a lack of information about the program generally. One of the most significant and stubborn barriers is the so-called “split incentive” problem in which landlords usually pay for upgrades associated with energy efficiency programs, yet tenants are the ones who benefit most from said upgrades. Not only does landlord power come from the leases signed by tenants, which prevent tenants from making any substantive alterations to their home without the permission of their landlord, but landlords lack economic incentives to partake in an energy efficiency program if tenants pay the bills. Chelsea faces circumstances that make all of these concerns particularly salient, including a large portion of the population being renters and non-native English speakers.

Similar programs elsewhere have tried various ways to encourage participation that elucidate broad principles for Chelsea: Partnering with local organizations that already foster trust in the community can encourage people to participate in the program. One example, Efficiency Vermont, utilized the Vermont Foodbank to collaborate in the distribution of energy efficiency products. Meeting people where they are can increase awareness. This comprises everything from marketing through community organizations and events to using “Out of Home” marketing at places like bus stops where people are bound to encounter the messages in their routines. Finally, short term intensive campaigns may work better than ongoing low intensity ones. The Connecticut United Illuminating Homeworks Program saw a 27% increase in program participation out of 100,000 eligible residents after dedicating a time frame of 7–10 days to send mailers, canvass door-to-door, and install new appliances.

Recommendations

The students made a number of marketing focused recommendations. Their slides and full length reports include numerous mock-ups and examples. In brief, these recommendations include:

1. Work with organizations such as La Colaborativa and All In Energy

- Build on trusting relationships and mitigate concerns about interactions with government or someone trying to sell something
 - Go door to door with community groups (see “Blitz Approach”) below
 - Include information about energy programs as part of existing La Colaborativa Renters Workshop

2. Reach residents where they are by combining mailers with out of home marketing

- Send mailers with messages targeted to renters or landlords (see below)
- Market at bus stops, food pantries, schools, senior centers, and elsewhere

3. Use tailored, targeted, and culturally relevant messaging

- **For tenants:** Emphasize the fact that you are already contributing to the program and that many others are taking advantage of it.
- **For landlords:** Focus on monetary benefits including property values and ability to get subsidies to make units more marketable.
- A Fotonovela and Txt2Save Campaign could provide culturally relevant promotional material to attract the Latinx community in Chelsea. La Colaborativa and All In Energy would be natural partners for this culturally relevant approach.

4. Use an intensive “physical blitz” approach

- **Follow-up on mailers with teams of representatives from La Colaborativa and All In Energy going door-to-door to communicate the benefits of MassSave.** The All In Energy member can explain the technical aspects of signing up for the initial free home energy assessment, while the La Colaborativa member can serve as an interpreter and comforting figure for the Spanish-speaking tenants. The door-to-door method will establish trust between the tenants and local community

groups as the sustained dialogue allows for concerns and questions to be answered without being too overbearing.

5. Build trust by providing free (branded) energy efficiency kits

- Give homeowners and tenants kits that contain LED light bulbs, efficient shower heads, and other efficient equipment. Make them available in high-traffic areas, or in partnership with community organizations. Such kits should also feature media on other MassSave programs, with referral links included. Beyond providing immediate relief, a review of the literature indicates that such an intervention would likely increase uptake of MassSave home energy audits—both directly, by increasing awareness of MassSave, and indirectly, by increasing social trust (previous literature finds that cash transfers increase trust in local governments).