

Expo helps low-income customers manage heating costs

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Written by Julie Zenner, Duluth freelance writer

One sure sign that winter is near is the annual Energy Awareness Expo at the Salvation Army in Duluth. The event is a one-stop-shop for residents on low or fixed incomes to sign up for weatherization and energy assistance, receive free energy-saving products for their homes, and learn ways to conserve energy and manage winter heating costs.

The **Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency, Minnesota Power** and **ComfortSystems** sponsor the Expo. This year's ninth annual event was Oct. 24, with a gusty wind and cold drizzle reminding attendees of the harsh months to come.

"Winter is a stressful time for many area individuals and families who already are dealing with tight budgets," said **Amanda Oja**, MP energy efficiency analyst. "Many of them really look forward to this event."

Folks began lining up outside the Salvation Army well before the doors opened and moved through the expo in a steady stream for most of the day. Altogether, an estimated 1,500 people attended this year's expo, which also included a hearty lunch of pulled pork, chicken, potatoes, vegetables, rolls and dessert.

"I come for the fellowship with friends and for the energy-saving products," said Richard Ryzak, a longtime attendee. "I always use them."

That sentiment was echoed by many in the room, who could be overheard talking about the importance of the event to their households.

"Thank you so much for doing this," said an elderly woman who stopped by Minnesota Power's booth to visit and pick up an energy-saving kit. For those on fixed incomes, every opportunity to lower monthly costs is greatly appreciated, especially in the current economy.

"There's no questioning how great this expo is for our customers," said **George Radosevich**, MP customer information representative. "Not only do we get to provide customers with information from several different companies and the energy-saving kits, but they receive the simple comfort of a warm meal. Definitely a great cause."

FREE KITS

Minnesota Power partners with ComfortSystems to provide the free kits with easy-to-use products that conserve energy in the home. This year's kits included CFL light bulbs, a refrigerator thermometer, a low-flow showerhead, window shrink wrap, weather stripping, faucet aerators, and a smart power strip. A total of 807 kits were distributed at one per household.



Richard Ryzak has attended the Expo for many years.

Members of Minnesota Power's Power of One® energy conservation team spent much of the day explaining the smart power strip technology and how it can significantly reduce home energy use.

"Many electronic devices draw power even when you are not using them" said Al Lian, energy efficiency analyst, as he showed one young family a smart power strip. "If you plug your computer into the master outlet on the smart strip and related items, like the printer, scanner and modem, into the remaining outlets, the smart strip will automatically cut power to those accessories when your computer is turned off."

ROOM FOR CARE

A separate room was set up for Minnesota Power's Customer Affordability of Residential Electricity (CARE) program, which is now in its second year. CARE offers income-qualified households a discount on their monthly electric bills. Last year, it helped about 2,000 residential customers lower their energy costs.

"We want to help people avoid falling behind on their energy bills. Through CARE, they pay smaller amounts on a monthly basis," said **Luann LaValley**, director of customer service, Minnesota Power. "First time applicants also complete a Your Home Energy Report survey to help us create customized energy-saving plans for their households."

"It was gratifying to know that our customers recognized the fact that we were helping them – as opposed to just collecting their payments and moving on," said **Andrea Smith**, MP customer information representative. "I feel like we were really able to educate and enlighten our customers, which was really the goal of the Expo."

Bonnie Yoder, MP customer information representative, added, "It is always satisfying for me to work this event, to see the community come together to make it happen and how appreciative the customers are. "

Partners in the Energy Awareness Expo were pleased with the energy of this year's event.

"People were very engaged," said Eric Schlacks, gas and energy coordinator at ComfortSystems. "They asked good questions and had an impressive level of knowledge and interest in energy efficiency."

"We continue to believe this is a value-added event," said **Tina Koecher**, manager of billing and energy efficiency at Minnesota Power. "The Expo empowers people to stretch their energy dollars through efficient choices and connects them to available resources in a warm, welcoming atmosphere. It is a great way to help customers get ready for the heating season."

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