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Stimulus money to provide geothermal heat systems to low income

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Federal stimulus money will be used to install free geothermal home heating and cooling systems worth about \$15,000 each in the homes of 15 lucky Central Missouri residents who have applied for free low income weatherization assistance.

Randy Cole, Central Missouri Community Action energy conservation coordinator, said he was told to write an innovative weatherization grant request for the stimulus money from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Cole said he decided to add the free geothermal heating and cooling systems as part of his request. The request was approved as a test to determine the cost effectiveness of the plan.

As a result, 15 lucky Central Missourians will soon have free geothermal systems installed in their homes. The 15 geothermal units will be spread over the eight-county Central Missouri Community Action region. The region includes the counties of Audrain, Boone, Callaway, Cole, Cooper, Howard, Moniteau and Osage.

Cole said one or two geothermal heating and cooling systems are likely go each county served by CMCA. He said the people receiving geothermal systems will be taken from a list of low income people who already have applied for weatherization assistance. "We have about 400 names already on that list," Cole said.

Cole said the geothermal heating and cooling system for 15 families will be financed by about half of the \$550,000 federal economic stimulus money grant to Central Missouri Community Action. The grant money also includes funds to weatherize 50 homes in Central Missouri.

Cole said it can cost up to \$3,000 a home to weatherize a home by adding insulation, weather stripping, and other measures. That would push the government's cost of improving a home receiving a free geothermal heating and cooling system to about \$18,000.

Cole said he made the grant request as an experiment in trying to make poor people more self-sufficient.

One way to do this, he believes, is to install free geothermal heating and cooling systems in homes. "This will mean a dramatic decrease in their heating and cooling bills," Cole said.

In choosing a home to install a geothermal system, Cole said one of the criteria is to find an applicant that has a fairly energy-efficient home after it has been weatherized.

The geothermal system involves sinking pipes deep into the ground around a home and circulating water in the buried pipes. Water in the pipes transfers the natural heat of the ground in the winter to help warm the house. In the summer the natural coolness of the ground, compared to the surface temperature, is used to cool the home. The consistent difference in surface and subsurface temperatures in the winter and summer is used as a cheap form of energy transfer in the geothermal heating and cooling systems.

The U.S. Department of Energy is spending \$120 million in government economic stimulus money on its weatherization assistance program.

The economic stimulus money is provided through the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act approved by Congress to help boost the economy.

CMCA is the only agency in Missouri receiving the U.S. Department of Energy stimulus money grant.

In addition to the \$550,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Energy, Central Missouri Community Action also will receive money from Associated Electric Cooperative. The rural cooperative has agreed to provide \$300 for each energy audit completed in homes that receive rural electric cooperative services. The cooperative also has agreed to provide materials necessary to weatherize these homes.

Cole said the additional help from the rural electric cooperative will allow grant funds to help weatherize more homes.

Cole said families with low incomes pay as much as 30 percent more of their annual incomes for energy than middle income taxpayers.

Cole said since mid-June, CMCA has weatherized 255 homes in its eight-county region in Mid-Missouri.

Darin Preis, CMCA executive director, said the geothermal heating and cooling grants also will help create highly skilled jobs that will be generated through the installation of geothermal heating and cooling systems.

More information about the free weatherization program for low income people is available by contacting the Central Missouri Community Action office in Fulton at 610 Collier Lane or by calling the Fulton office at 573-642-3316.