

Weatherization affects thousands

19,500 HOUSING UNITS: \$66.5 million in federal funds used in state since 2009 act

BY JOHN DODGE
Staff writer

Thousands of low-income families in Washington are paying less on their heating bills and living in greater comfort thanks to a home-weatherization program funded by the federal government the past three years.

"They just made it very

comfortable for all of us," Betty Rivas of Centralia said of the 2011 work on her natural gas heating system and water heater.

The work supervised by the Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason and Thurston Counties also included insulating from top to bottom her four-bedroom home built in 1954, plus improving the ventilation system to circulate warm air evenly throughout the home.

However, the \$66.5 mil-

lion that flowed into the state from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for low-income energy-conservation work has ended, raising questions about future funding in these tough budget times.

More than 19,500 housing units in the state were made more energy-efficient in the past three years, including 12,500 that benefited from the federal stimulus funding, according to state Department

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ment of Commerce figures.

By comparison, about 70,000 housing units have received energy-conservation measures since the low-income program began in 1993.

Roughly twice as many housing units in the state still qualify for low-income weatherization work, noted Steve Payne, managing director for housing improvements and preservation at the state commerce department.

"The federal stimulus program gained a lot of attention, but now we're starting to see a reduction in work,"

he said, noting that the federal stimulus projects ended Dec. 31 and next year's federal funding could be 60 percent below traditional levels.

The energy-efficiency upgrades included increased insulation and new windows, doors, heaters and cooling systems.

Gov. Chris Gregoire and U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu joined on a conference call Thursday to announce that the state had surpassed its goal of weatherizing 7,500 housing units in the state with federal stimulus money.

"The investment we've made over the last three years is paying huge dividends in Washington and

across the country," Chu said. "Not only has it put Americans back to work, it has helped families save money by saving energy."

The state program helped cut an average participating household's energy bill by \$400 per year and created 500 direct and indirect temporary jobs, the governor said.

"We're spending about \$35 a month less on our gas heating bill since the work was done," Rivas said of her family of six. "It's a great program."

Nationally, the program reached 600,000 homes with projected annual energy savings of \$320 million per year, according to the federal energy department.

Locally, the Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason and Thurston Counties weatherized more than 1,000 low-income homes since 2009, with nearly 70 percent of them partially funded by federal stimulus grants, according to Dale Lewis, director of housing and emergency services for the group.

Chu said the next step in home weatherization is to create self-sustaining programs that reach more than just low-income families. He estimated that 100 million of the nation's 140 million homes could use some sort of energy-efficiency upgrade.

John Dodge: 360-754-5444
jdodge@theolympian.com