

## **Says Who? Transitioning from Utility to Third-Party Energy Efficiency Information Sources**

*Kathy Kuntz, Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation*  
*Barbara Samuel, Wisconsin Department of Administration*  
*Jessica Kurtenbach, Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation*

### **ABSTRACT**

Historically Wisconsin consumers have relied on their gas and electric utility companies for information and advice when it comes to energy efficiency issues. Surveys indicate that upwards of 70 percent of Wisconsin consumers identify their utility as a primary source of information on energy issues. This confidence level was beneficial when Wisconsin utilities were the primary deliverers of energy efficiency information and programs, but responsibility for those activities is now transitioning away from utilities to the state and its non-profit contractors. This means that utilities are less informed about program offerings and they may be less invested in talking with residential consumers about energy efficiency issues. One of the primary challenges for the state's new public benefits programs, then, is successfully transitioning consumer queries from the utilities to the third parties who are implementing energy efficiency programs as part of the state's public benefits programs.

This paper will explore the challenges and surprises involved in transitioning from a system where each utility delivered information to residential customers independently to one where the statewide public benefits program is intended to be the primary source of information and program offerings. The authors summarize the strategies used to facilitate this transition as well as lessons learned.

### **Introduction**

In 2001 Wisconsin began transitioning away from utility-sponsored energy efficiency and toward state-sponsored initiatives. Among other things, this meant that there was now a different source of information about energy efficiency and especially about the energy efficiency program offerings available to Wisconsin ratepayers. (This paper focuses on the challenges of establishing a new information resource for residential customers; issues associated with the transition for other customer classes are not addressed here.) To appreciate the challenges, one must understand how consumers got information prior to the transition as well as something about the way Wisconsin is transitioning its energy efficiency efforts.

As part of the state's historic emphasis on demand-side management (DSM), Wisconsin's utilities—especially the large investor-owned utilities—have implemented energy efficiency and energy conservation programs since the late 1970s. As part of those efforts, utilities provided consumers with information about energy efficiency and energy conservation. While some customers might not have understood the rationale behind DSM efforts, the ongoing utility offerings—rebates on compact fluorescent lights, furnaces and water heaters, free energy audits, and volumes of advice about energy use on bills, bill

stuffers and in various publications available from the utility—demonstrated that the utility was a prime go-to place for energy issues. Wisconsin market research indicates that consumers got this message loud and clear; in surveys 60 to 70 percent of Wisconsin consumers say that when they have questions about energy they go to their utility (Opinion Dynamics, 2000).

Wisconsin’s approach to “public benefits” is typical. The state implemented public benefits programs without electrical restructuring—as did Vermont—but Wisconsin’s approach differs from Vermont’s in several significant ways.

1. The state Department of Administration’s Division of Energy (DOA) actively manages Wisconsin’s public benefits program. DOA contracts with four non-profit organizations for program implementation and another six for-profit and non-profit organizations for baseline research, marketing, evaluation, compliance issues, and general administrative consulting.
2. Wisconsin’s program is statewide with exceptions; about 20 percent of electrical customers are served by a municipal utility or electric cooperative that has the option of joining the ‘statewide’ program or operating their own local programs.

In October 1999, the Wisconsin Legislature created a public benefits program without deregulating Wisconsin’s electric markets (DOA, 2000). The Reliability Act of 1999 transitioned primary responsibility for low-income energy services, energy efficiency and renewable energy initiatives, and environmental research from the state’s investor-owned utilities to state government. The legislation required the state Department of Administration (which includes the state energy office) to contract with Wisconsin-based non-profit firms to develop and implement programs.

Funding was set at the level of utility spending in 1998 and generated through a combination of the dollars still embedded in rates and a new fee on all electric bills. The state’s municipal utilities and electric cooperatives, which serve about 20 percent of all residential customers, were required to collect a public benefits fee and either join the statewide effort or develop and implement their own local programs under a “Commitment to Community” clause. All investor-owned utilities were required to participate in the new statewide effort. From the onset the investor-owned utilities contributed all of the new monies generated via the electric fee and a portion of the dollars still embedded in rates. The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin gave utilities up to three years to transition the embedded dollars to the statewide program; this transition was intended to prevent gaps in service. The speed of transition varied from one utility to the next and the Commission permitted utilities to permanently retain some of the embedded dollars to cover customer service costs associated with conservation and efficiency.

Authorized in late 1999, the Department of Administration’s Division of Energy (DOA) had an implementation plan in place by fall 2000 and began selecting Administrators shortly thereafter. By late 2001, the DOA had selected non-profits to administer Residential, Major Markets (i.e., non-residential customer classes including industrial, commercial, institutional and agricultural), Renewable Energy and Environmental Research. (Administration of the new low-income monies was folded into the state’s weatherization and heating assistance infrastructure.) The state also issued contracts for baseline market

research, evaluation, compliance auditing and, in early 2002, marketing. Both for-profit and non-profit organizations competed for these contracts.

## **Wisconsin Focus on Energy**

### **The Pilot Program**

The state called the new statewide energy initiative Wisconsin Focus on Energy. This name—along with a lot of lessons learned about implementation strategies—originated in a pilot program that began in 1998 in northeast Wisconsin. The pilot tested the idea of state-managed, contractor-delivered energy efficiency and renewable energy programs. The politics behind the pilot yielded a model where the state and its contractors operated autonomously from the utilities that served the pilot customers. Pilot personnel did not provide utility staffs with information about the pilot program offerings, and there were no referral mechanisms.

Under the pilot program the marketing firm conducted several television and radio campaigns to establish Focus as a credible source of information for consumers and businesses. Ads encouraged customers to call an 800 line or visit the Focus website. Consistent with the politics of the pilot, the ads did not mention any of the utilities serving the pilot-territory customers. These ads did not substantially increase the call volume.

Call volume on the Focus 800 line was light throughout the pilot; a single person staffed the line, in addition to performing other responsibilities in support of the non-residential programs. Calls from residential customers were referred to the organization implementing residential programs. While the pilot marketing included the telephone number it was not the focus of promotions. Volume was likely affected by the fact that ads for specific residential programs (e.g., Wisconsin ENERGY STAR<sup>®</sup> Homes program) directed consumers to other 800 lines, which were staffed by the residential program implementer.

An evaluation of the marketing for the pilot website indicated that even among the households with internet access (46.8 percent of surveyed households had access at home or work), only about 1 in 7 households sought energy information via the intranet. Households were more likely to rely on newspapers and magazines, utilities, and contractors or builders for information (PA Consulting, 2001).

One of DOA's often-stated goals regarding the pilot was to identify lessons that could eventually be applied to the statewide public benefits initiative. In this instance not only were lessons identified but adjustments were made. Specifically, DOA asked residential programs to drop their separate 800 lines and the Focus 800 line was modified so that callers could ring through to either the Residential Information Center or the Major Markets (that is, non-residential) team. As described below, the relationship between Focus administrators and the utilities also changed dramatically.

### **The Statewide Effort**

Wisconsin Focus on Energy launched its statewide residential offerings on June 1, 2001. The Focus residential programs build on the national ENERGY STAR<sup>®</sup> initiative and include offerings for new construction, existing homes and ENERGY STAR products. Under Focus, residential also includes all multifamily initiatives, regardless of building size, for

both new and existing buildings. In all of these programs there is a strong emphasis on education, both in terms of professional education that will strengthen the market infrastructure for energy efficient goods and services and in terms of consumer education to increase demand. Information and education initiatives aimed at consumers include call center and website services as well as partnerships with other consumer information sources like county extension agents and public libraries.

Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation (WECC) and its team of subcontractors won the bid to develop and implement residential programs. Prior to public benefits, WECC had been doing this same work for some of Wisconsin's utilities, so some of the programs WECC proposed were already in the field in some areas of the state and WECC had good working relationships with various utilities. Nevertheless, WECC did not name utilities as a collaborator on information services in their initial proposal to the state. More than anything this reflected the uncertainty about what role utilities would choose to play going forward.

Despite the uncertainty at the proposal stage, once WECC had the contract they made utility involvement a priority. A few weeks before the programs rolled out statewide WECC and DOA staff met with utilities to talk about the programs and to talk about the benefits of collaboration. As the program administrator, WECC was interested in co-marketing programs, in data sharing and in coordinating call center operations. Utilities were interested in making sure that their customers received benefits consistent with the dollars invested in programs. This issue of equity was critical; while both DOA and WECC asserted a commitment to ensuring that all eligible customers would have access to services, DOA staff made clear that the statewide programs would not guarantee that each utility territory received services in proportion to the dollars invested from that territory. In the first joint meeting and in the one-on-one meetings that followed, WECC emphasized the benefits of collaboration. WECC staff noted that Wisconsin utilities have credibility with their customers; by endorsing Focus programs they could increase participation and ultimately increase the benefits delivered to their customers.

In general, WECC sought a minimum level of collaboration from every participating utility so that when a customer goes to the utility for assistance on energy efficiency the customer gets accurate and timely assistance with as little hassle as possible. WECC and DOA want customers to hear that there are Focus programs available to them and, at a minimum, to get information about how to learn more.

Utility reactions to this pitch have been varied. Certainly all of the utilities would prefer that if there is inequity in benefits it is their customers who benefit disproportionately from these programs. But actual implementation varies, usually based on a utility's interest in its residential customer base, the utility's perspective on Focus program offerings, the utility's corporate enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for energy efficiency initiatives in general, and the utility's strategy for ongoing customer service related to conservation and energy efficiency.

One way to categorize specific utility strategies toward energy efficiency and conservation is to look at funding. The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin allowed each utility to retain some conservation dollars for "customer service conservation and load management" activities. Overall, 28 percent of the dollars were retained by utilities but percentages vary widely from one utility to another (PSCW, 2001). See Figure 1 for a summary of the dollars retained by each of the large investor-owned utilities. Current allowable uses of the customer service conservation and load management dollars include

efforts to promote Focus programs, utility newsletters and appearances at trade shows associated with efficiency, and a farm rewiring program where efficiency is a key component (Stemrich, 2002). Utilities can also promote Focus funds using the monies that they have not yet transitioned to Focus. (There is a three-year period during which utilities are transitioning funding to Focus; this transition was intended to reduce service gaps between the old utility programs and the new Focus programs.)

**Table 1. Summary of Funding Transitioned to Focus on Energy vs. Retained by Utility for Customer Service Associated with Conservation**

Investor-Owned Utility	Total Available (Based on 1998 Spending)	Transitioned to Focus	Retained	Percentage Retained
Wisconsin Fuel and Light	\$331,222	\$331,222	\$0	0%
Superior Water Light & Power	601,111	381,623	21,9488	37%
Wisconsin Gas	2,682,198	2,682,198	0	0%
Madison Gas & Electric	4,145,099	191,502	3,953,597	95%
Xcel Energy	5,981,138	3,145,310	2,835,828	47%
Wisconsin Public Service	14,593,500	8,936,143	5,657,357	39%
Wisconsin Electric	17,033,354	15,329,522	1,703,832	10%
Alliant Energy	17,453,150	14,112,837	3,340,313	19%

Source: Public Service Commission of Wisconsin, 2001

WECC has seen three primary kinds of reactions to appeals for collaboration from the large investor-owned utilities:

1. Some utilities had subcontracted out all residential energy efficiency programs for years and for those utilities the biggest change under Focus is where their internal call center sends efficiency inquiries—that is, rather than sending them to a utility subcontractor they now send them to the state’s Focus Administrator. In these cases the challenge is finding and cultivating allies inside a utility that is not typically very interested in energy efficiency. Without an ally inside the utility Focus will miss referral opportunities and lack access to utility-customer communications. Whether or not WECC can cultivate an ally depends in great part on the utility’s broader strategies, which, as utility mergers continue, may not even be something WECC can access within a Wisconsin network.
2. The needs are more complicated for the utilities that delivered programs directly until very recently. Those utilities continue to appear at home shows and to respond to customer queries directly, so they are now selling Focus programs rather than utility programs to their customers. These utilities tend to want more involvement in Focus efforts and are more likely to take issue with Focus program strategies, especially if they are different than the strategies their utility pursued historically. Accordingly, these utilities represent special communication challenges. But the potential benefits are enormous because if these partnership work, the utilities will actively promote Focus programs to their customers.
3. And between these extremes are the utilities that appear conflicted over what to do; their approach varies by department and individual or the specifics of a situation. In these cases WECC offers models from the other two categories and tries to remain flexible enough to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise.

Initially, the reactions from the small investor-owned utilities and the municipal utilities that joined the statewide program had been far more consistent: most of these utilities sent their money to the state and considered their responsibility fulfilled. It is generally very difficult to interest these utilities in any sort of collaboration but there are a small but significant number of exceptions. As Focus programs become more established in some areas of the state, a few of these utilities are demonstrating an increased interest in understanding the offerings and being able to promote those offerings to their customers. Again, this seems to be driven by concerns about equity and the utilities that implemented programs historically tend to be more interested in collaboration than those that did not provide energy efficiency services to residential customers.

## **Current Conditions**

The residential programs were launched in June 2001, so as of this writing we are less than a year into this effort. At this point referrals from utilities are a critical portion of the Focus residential business. In the October through February timeframe, about 45 percent of the consumers who contacted the Residential Information Center were referred by their utility. This represents about 6,750 of the total 15,000 customer queries received during this timeframe. The utility referrals have been especially important in these early months of Focus because marketing efforts have been limited. The utility referrals ensured a base level of program activity.

To make these partnerships work, WECC identified key contacts at each utility that included someone in their call center and someone with broader residential responsibilities—typically a person in marketing or product development. WECC provided these individuals with:

1. One-page fact sheets on all of the residential programs that indicate who the program can help and the benefits available to program participants.
2. Bi-monthly communications updates that detail all marketing and promotional activity, and any significant changes in program offerings.

Additionally, WECC has established a staff position to serve as a liaison to the utilities. The Outreach Specialist spends more than half her time staying in touch with the utilities; she writes the utility updates, pursues opportunities for bill stuffers, and responds to utility queries about program offerings. The Specialist will also conduct workshops on the Focus offerings for utility call center personnel. To date she has conducted trainings for a few of the smaller utilities. Call center training is something that staff will be promoting more actively in future months, especially for utilities where there are some ongoing concerns about their level of engagement.

The Outreach Specialist position was filled in January and since January four utilities have done bill stuffers promoting one or more Focus programs, two utilities have included the Outreach Specialist in meetings with trade allies and several other cooperative initiatives are still in development. The bill stuffers are particularly helpful to our programs because the stuffer represents a utility endorsement of one or more Focus programs. As an example, We Energies (formerly Wisconsin Electric/Wisconsin Gas) produced a bill stuffer promoting multiple Focus residential programs in their March-April billing cycle. Call volume

increased more than 50 percent during this timeframe. The We Energies promotion coincided with some Focus-sponsored program-specific mass media, which certainly also affected call volume. A better indicator of the effect of the We Energies bill stuffer is, perhaps, the percentage of callers who were We Energies' customers; We Energies' customers represented 31 percent of callers prior to the stuffer and they were 48 percent of callers in the weeks following the distribution of the bill stuffer.

Finally, in response to feedback from utility personnel, WECC staff collaborated with the Major Markets staff to establish a utility extranet site. This password-protected website offers utility personnel summaries of program offerings, a calendar of events, a phone and email directory of all Focus personnel, and information about ongoing efforts to improve collaboration. As the site evolves, utilities will also be able to order program-related marketing materials and monitor program outcomes via the site. One of the key objectives of the site was to ensure that utility field personnel would have easy access to information about program offerings, especially in the non-residential sectors. Still, WECC anticipates that the site will also be very useful to utility call center personnel and it provides another way to communicate with utility marketing and product development staffs.

At present utility referral strategies vary. Some utilities answer customer questions themselves and fax us information requests for fulfillment, others hot transfer the customer calls to us and still others simply provide their customers with the Focus 800 number. Focus evaluators are currently examining these options and assessing both effectiveness and customer satisfaction. The evaluation findings will provide Focus staff with another opportunity to talk with utilities about their interactions with Focus.

## **Bumps in the Road**

While the overall quality and quantity of referrals the Focus residential programs receive from the utilities is excellent, there have been some significant challenges to overcome.

Several early challenges had to do with the transition itself. In the early weeks of Focus, for example, WECC heard from multiple customers who reported that when they called their utility the call center representative told them that the utility could not help them anymore because the state had taken their funds away. Rather than trying to identify specific call center representatives, WECC staff worked with utility call center supervisors to address the anxieties underlying these comments. WECC asked supervisors to remind their staffs that the bulk of the calls they handled—new service requests, billing questions, etc.—would continue to be the responsibility of the utility call center.

The other early referral challenge related to a tendency among utility call center personnel to avoid potentially unpopular pronouncements. Wisconsin utilities have not offered incentives on high efficiency furnaces since the late 1980s but customers still call asking if rebates are available. Once Focus was in place statewide some utility call center personnel simply referred these customers to Focus, rather than indicating that rebates were not available. As a result, numerous Focus customer interactions began with a customer saying "My utility told me to call you for my furnace rebate," and most went downhill from there. When WECC staff communicated their concerns about these referrals to the utilities the staff noted that these customers ended up feeling disgruntled at both Focus and their utility. Utility personnel were very responsive and the incidence of consumer demands for

furnace rebates dropped dramatically. (This specific issue disappeared in February 2002 when Focus began offering Cash-Back Rewards on multi-stage high-efficiency furnaces.)

Some referral challenges, though, are ongoing. In cases where the Focus programs are substantially different than the ones operated previously by the utility, it is a challenge for the utility personnel to see, much less sell the benefits of the Focus program. The program for existing homes, for example, differs from a number of the programs utilities operated historically insofar as the WECC team is not subsidizing the cost of home energy assessments. This strategy is consistent with the Focus vision for building a sustainable market-driven infrastructure but it is in direct contrast to the \$30 audits offered in the past by several Wisconsin utilities. Staff at the utilities that offered the \$30 audit find it a challenge to promote the Focus assessment that typically costs five to ten times as much as the utility audit cost. These utility personnel are often very sensitive to customer concerns about the cost of the Focus assessment, in part because the personnel themselves are still not comfortable with the shift in strategy.

The good thing about issues like the furnace calls or the utility concerns over the assessment costs is that the problems are explicit. Some issues are far subtler. The ENERGY STAR products program, which promotes the benefits of ENERGY STAR qualified appliances, is a good example. While Focus offers Cash-Back Rewards on some ENERGY STAR items, staff encourages the retailer partners to talk benefits first and use those Rewards only as a tool for closing the sale. Similarly, Focus staff would hope that utility call center personnel are talking about product benefits rather than rebates but this is enormously difficult to monitor. Focus can (and does) object if a utility proposes to promote our rebates rather than program benefits in a bill stuffer or other advertising and staff try to use those discussions as opportunities to articulate the Focus position. Still, this issue of spin is probably the most important rationale for having the Outreach Specialist conduct trainings at the utility call centers.

Another early challenge involved utility concerns about capacity. Almost every utility expressed concern that WECC would not be adequately staffed for utility referrals. Most utilities also asked if the call center would operate 24/7 as they do. On the first issue WECC staff assured utilities that they were monitoring call volume and were prepared to add staff as necessary. And WECC reminded the utility personnel that the calls they would be forwarding to Focus were a small portion of their overall volume. On the issue of operating hours WECC noted that the website would be available 24/7 but that WECC had no evidence that it would be cost-effective to operate the Information Center 24/7. At the same time WECC and DOA did commit to monitoring call volume in off hours to determine if some extended hours would be appropriate.

WECC staff also had to reach agreement about a way to talk about the collaborations with the utilities and the utility role in Focus. Words matter. Several utilities suggested that they term themselves a “Sponsor” of Wisconsin Focus on Energy but the term sponsor seemed to suggest a funding and oversight relationship that was not accurate. Ratepayers fund Focus, not the utilities and DOA oversees the programs, not the utilities. In the end all parties agreed to call participating utilities “Partners” in Wisconsin Focus on Energy.

Naturally WECC staff also had to cope with all of the challenges associated with getting new programs up and running. In this case, because the utilities had no role in the start up, all of the typical time delays and missteps lacked a context for them. Customers, though, often held utilities accountable for their experiences with Focus. This meant that

there were times when utility personnel expressed considerable frustration with Focus programs, often comparing the brand-new Focus initiatives to the fully-evolved efforts that the utility had fielded previously. We have learned that there's a very fine line between expectation management and sounding defensive.

Underlying many of these challenges is the issue of ownership. Historically the utilities were in charge and now they are not. Certainly WECC solicits utility input into programs and some utilities have representatives on DOA's Public Benefits Council, but this is hardly the same as the utility role historically. Utilities are not choosing the firms who are implementing programs, they are not choosing the programs that get implemented, and they are not managing the messages that are communicated to their customers. For those utilities that remain engaged in residential energy efficiency, this can be a substantial and ongoing challenge. While both WECC and DOA want utilities to help promote Focus programs, in the end WECC and DOA are accountable for program outcomes. In some cases staff has agreed to disagree with a utility on a specific program. Staff recognizes that this might mean that the utility personnel will not promote the program as fully as they might otherwise. In other cases staff have had to accept that certain utilities are focused on other priorities and that these utilities will not invest their resources in a Focus partnership for residential customers.

## **Lessons Learned**

Obviously it is too soon to make assertions about the effectiveness of Wisconsin's overall approach to public benefits. Various evaluation efforts are already underway, though, so some preliminary conclusions may be available soon. Regarding the information and education initiatives discussed here, conclusions are further complicated by the fact that the relationships between Focus and the various utilities are very dynamic. Several utilities have significantly changed their approach to collaboration, for example, while this paper was being written. That said, there remain some significant lessons learned from the early stages of this effort to begin to transition consumers to a third-party source of information about energy efficiency issues.

When WECC proposed its residential programs to DOA WECC asserted that the Residential Information Center could overcome customer information barriers and become a primary source of information for customers. WECC did not mention an ongoing role for the utilities. If WECC staff were to rewrite that proposal today the text would certainly read differently. Today staff would talk about an ongoing role for the utilities and the multiple advantages to a partnership with utilities. Staff would probably talk about the utilities as a conduit that helps Focus reach customers more cost effectively and that helps to credential Focus with customers. Instead of suggesting a scenario that did not include the utilities, WECC would likely discuss one where staff worked hand in hand with the utilities on behalf of customers.

The second big lesson is that building a viable partnership with the utilities is a lot of work. Staff needs to continually reinvest in these relationships. Communication is critical. WECC staff has spent considerable time meeting with utilities and listening to their concerns; the utility extranet site is an example of how WECC and other Focus administrators are responding to those concerns. In March, WECC convened a meeting with all of the utilities participating in Focus residential programs to review progress on its residential programs and get feedback on their plans for the second fiscal year. At the

meeting WECC staff shared data about the impact of utility promotions on call volume in an effort to promote increased collaboration. The strategy worked; the data persuaded one of the utilities that had been reluctant to do a bill staffer to do one immediately. Beyond these formal discussions WECC's Outreach Specialist is in regular contact with staff at various utilities and WECC will meet individually with each of the large investor-owned utilities this summer to further cement relationships.

These partnerships require a lot of effort because they are and will continue to be quite fragile. There are all kinds of barriers to successful partnership. One barrier is the balance of power: DOA has final decision-making authority for programs but utilities have greater credibility with customers and, in some cases, greater influence with state legislators. This power balance is complicated by a history where utilities made decisions while DOA staff tried to influence programs from the sidelines. Variances in utility approaches to efficiency and even the residential market are another barrier; it is difficult to develop strategies that accommodate everyone. One might argue that even the legislation itself is a barrier; the legislation presumes that utilities will get out of the business of energy efficiency entirely, which is clearly not going to be the case in Wisconsin.

All that said, the biggest lesson learned is that to reach customers we have to make these partnerships work, hard or not. Both WECC and DOA have learned that even though Wisconsin has moved away from utility-led energy efficiency programs, utilities remain an important player in the delivery of effective residential energy efficiency. Collaborating with utilities increases our efficacy. The road is bumpy but it is worth traveling.

*Authors' Note: All opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors. Opinions do not reflect the official position of Focus on Energy or its subcontractors.*

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