



When You Know Your Work is Making an Impact It is Easy to Love What You Do

In Wisconsin, we are fortunate to have many of the great things that the Midwest has to offer, including four seasons. Although changes in weather throughout the year can be beautiful and enjoyable in many ways, it can also present challenges in terms of energy savings, safety and home warmth.

The Couleecap Weatherization program works to help individuals and families improve the energy efficiency of their residences. Some common services include insulating attics, sidewalls, air-sealing the structure, furnace inspections and energy conservation measures such as lighting and refrigerator replacement. Weatherization is available to homeowners as well as renters, and the work is done at no cost for qualifying households.

“We have worked with families of four to six individuals who spend their whole winter staying in the living room closest to the heat source,” explained Energy Auditor Jake Robertson. “We are able to go through and work with them and insulate their homes, so they are able to gain back that privacy and safety in their home along with the energy efficiency.”

Wisconsin’s Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources oversees the Wisconsin Weatherization Assistance Program. According to Wisconsin.gov “the federal Weatherization Assistance Program was created in 1976 to assist low-income families who lacked resources to invest in energy efficiency. The Weatherization Assistance Program is operated in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Native American tribes, and U.S territories. Funds are used to improve the energy efficiency of homes occupied by low-income households, using the most advanced technologies and testing protocols available in the housing industry. The energy conservation resulting from the efforts of state and local agencies help our country reduce its dependence on foreign oil and decrease the cost of energy for families in need while improving the health and safety of their homes.”

Safety is a huge aspect of what the Weatherization program encompasses. Safety with appropriate heat sources, enough heat, but also the safety education piece as well.

“Most people renting and owning homes weren’t given a class on it,” noted Jake. “Lots of homes in our rural areas are older and use a lot of energy. Often people go through an energy assessment and are blown away by the amount of energy that is being used. Client education is a large part of our work, providing information for them to have a safer home, while making their home more efficient and comfortable. There have been many times when we’ve done assessments and found things, like leaking carbon dioxide from a furnace, that could have killed the residents.”

In addition to being skilled workers and compassionate individuals, the workers of Couleecap’s weatherization program continues to hone their own education to provide modern and efficient solutions to energy problems.

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-Jake

Couleecap
your local community *action* program



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Our Mission

Couleecap fights poverty and promotes self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are **People Helping People**, and every day our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region.

“Long ago the way the program used to work was that an Energy Auditor would come in do some tests, take some photos and dictate what was done,” Jake explained. “Now, we are fully trained in building sciences, and we work, with that creed, ‘do no harm’- we look at how the whole home functions and make sure our work doesn’t leave bigger problems behind.”

Jake shares that energy audits conducted are much more technical now than in the past, often lasting three to four hours in the field in addition to time back in the office running accurate estimates for efficiency and insulation needs.

“All of the money put into this (energy efficiency and weatherization projects) goes back into peoples’ pockets through their energy savings,” explained Jake.

One hurdle Jake has encountered with his work at Couleecap, is folks who are hesitant to get assistance when they need it most.

“It can be a challenge when we reach people who think it’s just a ‘hand out’ or feel embarrassed to seek assistance. I always try to remind people that they don’t need to be embarrassed to apply, it’s why we’re here, to help. When I work with people who are worried that their need is going to take services away from someone else, I always try to remind them, ‘we’re here now, it’s your turn now.’”

Jake explained that often folks are surprised that they qualify for energy assistance, or think there is some kind of catch.

“I always tell folks that it’s not an entitlement and there isn’t a catch. They’ve been paying in for it for as long as they’ve been paying their electric bill with the mandatory fees that are on their bill from every company. And really, having this kind of work done in a home helps everyone save in the long run. As a non-profit, we’re not trying to sell anything, just be available to provide these services.”

Thanks to available funds, the weatherization program is able to be completed with no money out of pocket for those who qualify. Additionally, this program can also help folks during heating emergencies as well where they have no heat or unsafe heat. This includes not having access to heat due to physical limitations, for example if an individual is elderly and can no longer operate a woodstove or haul wood but has no other source of heat.

“We find that often furnace emergency situations will lead to more energy assistance and weatherization work. When we come into do a furnace emergency we always try to share that information and encourage them to feel free to call us and let them know we are here to help.”

Although the work is hard, often done in blazing hot attics and frigid snow, those who find themselves employed in the Weatherization and Energy Services Department at Couleecap find the work rewarding in unexpected ways.

“The workers are always amazed by how technical the job can be,” Jake shares. “We have to learn to use our heads in different ways. Regular construction can be exciting, you get to build a nice house and move on to the next one. But when you do this work, you get to see things differently. You’re at home, with the client, often for several days and you get to hear and see the change and feedback in real time. It’s important that we know our employees can not only do the physical work but can also have positive social interaction with clients. We often know right away when we’ve hired the right people. You need to want to help people to do this work, it’s very hard work but it’s important to do it with a positive attitude.”

Going forward for Couleecap and the State of Wisconsin, things are only getting brighter.

“Wisconsin was an early adopter and leader in weatherization,” Jake explained. “As we continue to work to improve health and safety as well as energy efficiency and look towards projects like water conservation, solar energy and more modern solutions in our rural area where fuels are expensive and homes are old we can look forward to seeing a lot of savings. We can continue to push things to be more progressive and innovative for the people we serve.”

