

Green and Healthy Task Force 2025 Annual Report

Public Utilities Article § 7-319(h)

July 1, 2025

Department of Housing and Community Development

Introduction

The Green and Healthy Task Force was created in 2023 through HB169 and is defined in Public Utilities Article §7-315. In 2024, HB864 required DHCD to collaborate with the Task Force to create a plan to provide a whole home approach that addresses health and safety upgrades, weatherization, energy efficiency, and other general maintenance for low-income housing. The plan must coordinate funding sources and leverage the greatest funding possible and ensure that there is a single point of contact for low-income residential households, and services are offered in any language needed by the low-income residential households.

DHCD has been internally working to create a whole home approach by integrating its energy programs with its rehabilitation programs and has been meeting with the Task Force on a monthly basis to discuss the cornerstones of the approach. This report summarizes the discussions and provides a status report on implementation progress.

This report addresses the following items:

1. Identifying Barriers to Reaching All Households
2. Addressing Barriers
 - a. Client Engagement & Outreach
 - b. Funding
 - c. Workforce
3. Summary

1. IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO REACHING ALL HOUSEHOLDS

a. AWARENESS & INFORMATION

Many households lack awareness of existing programs, and therefore, do not know they exist. Misinformation or confusion can discourage participation, as misunderstandings of program eligibility, benefits, or the application process create barriers. Language barriers further impede access, as non-English-speaking households may struggle to understand program materials. Distrust of government programs is another obstacle, with some residents wary of scams, hidden costs, or government intrusion. Additionally, some renters fear their landlords finding out about their low income, and some landlords hesitate to participate due to concerns about being reported for code violations. Stigma can also prevent households from participating, as some may avoid programs labeled for “low-income” residents due to shame or perceived judgment.

b. ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS

Complex applications present administrative hurdles, with lengthy or confusing paperwork, documentation requirements such as proof of income, utility bills, and homeownership verification, and bureaucratic delays that can be overwhelming. The digital divide also plays a role, as participation is often easier with online forms or email communication, which some low-income households may not be

equipped for. Scheduling conflicts arise when audits or installations require residents to be home during work hours, which is not feasible for many hourly or shift workers.

c. PROGRAM DESIGN

Program design itself creates barriers. Eligibility criteria such as income thresholds or ownership requirements may exclude many households in need. Split incentives in rental housing mean landlords may not want to participate since tenants get the benefit of lower bills while landlords bear the cost or hassle. Prior work disqualifications can also exclude homes that have received partial upgrades through another program from more comprehensive services.

d. TECHNICAL BARRIERS

Technical barriers include health and safety issues, where homes with mold, lead, roof leaks, or other hazards may be deferred until costly pre-repair work is done, often due to the limited availability of repair programs. Structural issues in older or poorly maintained buildings may also prevent upgrades without extensive rehabilitation. Additionally, households with utility disconnections may not qualify for upgrades until they are reconnected, which they may not be able to afford.

e. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

Funding availability is a significant barrier. Some programs have limited annual budgets, which means they cannot serve all eligible households, leading to long waitlists, deferred service, or caps on the number of upgrades per home. Stop-start funding cycles, where federal funds may arrive late in the year or be distributed irregularly, disrupt planning and delivery. Furthermore, restrictions on how funds can be used, such as the narrow allowable uses of LIHEAP and the Weatherization Assistance Program, may not cover needed repairs like roof or electrical work that are often necessary before energy upgrades can begin.

f. WORKFORCE AVAILABILITY

Finally, workforce availability poses a barrier. There is a shortage of qualified contractors, particularly in rural or underserved areas, where there may be few trained professionals certified to conduct energy audits or complete weatherization work. Labor retention issues are prevalent, especially in nonprofit-run programs, where energy efficiency jobs may not offer competitive wages or career growth, leading to high turnover. Delays due to contractor backlog occur even in well-staffed areas, as demand often outpaces supply, resulting in months-long waits for audits or upgrades. Additionally, workforce diversity and trust can be an issue in communities with historical distrust of institutions, where a workforce that does not reflect the demographics or cultural understanding of the households being served may be less effective in outreach and service delivery.

2. ADDRESSING BARRIERS

Following the discussion about barriers to the programs, three sub-committees were created to further

examine those barriers and find solutions to addressing them. The following sections report the outcomes of those subcommittee sessions.

a. CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

A high level of engagement with communities across the state of Maryland has been identified as essential for the success of the Whole Home Energy and Repair Programs. In 2024, DHCD hired two dedicated staff as Business Development Manager and an Outreach Liaison to focus on expanding outreach, marketing, and client engagement efforts. Below is a comprehensive overview of the strategies that were discussed, an overview of efforts DHCD is currently undertaking regarding those strategies, and additional opportunities that can be developed in the future.

Increase Awareness and Access to Program Information	
<p><u>Strategies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partner with trusted local groups to raise awareness ● Make materials available in foreign languages, use visuals and plain language ● Targeted marketing campaigns ● Avoid labeling programs as "low-income" and instead use terms like "affordable upgrades" or "home comfort improvements." 	<p><u>DHCD's Current Activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attend community events, at least six events per month, targeting low-income communities and local organizations that serve economically disadvantaged families. In 2024, a total of 100 events were attended, and 15,874 of energy program collateral were distributed. In 2025, the goal is to increase both the number of events and the distribution of collateral by 20%. ● Establish referral partner network to spread awareness: Send partners informational material to provide to their community, provide webinars and local visits to partners to better understand the programs and talk about them with their constituents. Provide enrollment options on site. ● Collaboration with MDThink, which will incorporate the Energy Efficiency Program into its new screening process, directing Maryland residents to the Energy Application. ● Partners include OHEP (monthly site visits), CASA, HIP, local governments and other housing related non-profits. ● Marketing brochures, social media ads, and applications are available in English and Spanish. ● All public facing materials have been updated with program related pictures and plain language. ● Developing monthly newsletters aimed at informing residents about new program opportunities, outreach campaigns, and the benefits of the Energy Efficiency Programs ● Regular marketing campaigns through channels like utility bill inserts, radio ads, public transit ads, inspector car wraps, social media.
	<p><u>Additional Opportunities for Development:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengthen depth of referral partnerships to lead to direct

	<p>enrollment instead of only spreading information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop more customer testimonials, showing before/after results and share satisfaction data.
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Simplify Enrollment and Application Process

<p><u>Strategies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorten forms, reduce required documentation, offer pre-filled applications • Offer applications in paper AND digital format • One-stop shop intake portal to apply for multiple services under one application • Intake support via multiple channels • Use categorical eligibility, self certification, or other flexible options. 	<p><u>DHCD's Current Activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overhauled application to reduce number of pages. • Issued combined application in 2025 to access energy and repair programs at the same time. This provides access to 3 energy programs and 5 repair programs through one application. • Application possible via paper, email, in person, digital form. Online application in development. • A QR code has been created to direct interested individuals to a Google Form where they can submit their contact details and receive an application. • Website presence has been restructured to simplify customer engagement and enhance the efficiency of the intake process. • Application support through a dedicated team of customer service reps. • Categorical eligibility based on up to 8 outside programs, such as SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, etc. • Geographical eligibility for EmPOWER program, based on location of customers in high poverty census tracts.
	<p><u>Additional Opportunities for Development:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TBD

Improve Access for Renters

<p><u>Strategies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide landlord incentives • Whole building offering for multifamily buildings • Educate landlords on benefits 	<p><u>DHCD's Current Activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MEEHA program addresses the whole building, including common areas and outside areas. • MEEHA program provides benefits for the spaces the landlord pays the bill for. • Holding educational webinars and in person sessions for landlords about program benefits
	<p><u>Additional Opportunities for Development:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TBD

Reduce Health & Safety Deferrals	
<u>Strategies:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop funding pool for repairs to avoid deferrals (also see funding section below) • Partner with healthcare, aging-in-place, or rehab programs to address hazards 	<u>DHCD's Current Activities:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated energy division with rehabilitation programs: combined application, cross-referrals, "site assessment first" approach, staff integration • In 2024, applied for and received two additional grants from HUD for lead hazard remediation and healthy home repairs • Partnering with MDH and MDE for comprehensive lead hazard approach • Offer lead testing to all homes built before 1978
	<u>Additional Opportunities for Development:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many of the existing repair programs are loan based and don't have case management included. To improve accessibility to low income households, more grant funding and more case management funding is needed. • TBD

b. FUNDING

DHCD staff worked with other state agencies and the members of the task force to identify all funding sources that are currently available to serve the purpose of providing comprehensive energy efficiency upgrades to low-income households. The available funding sources were provided in the Task Force's prior report dated December 1, 2024.

The data gathered by the Task Force is limited by the accessibility of information about decentralized programs. Some local governments receive direct funding from either local or federal sources, that is not reported on a statewide basis or easily accessible.

Additionally, the federal government issues various funds directly to local governments or property owners. How much of that funding is issued to entities in Maryland typically becomes public information only after it is awarded and reports on actual program benefits are not easily accessible.

There are other funding sources that could be used for energy efficiency work in low-income communities, but are not designated as such. This includes a variety of Community Block Grants. These programs typically do not have reporting requirements for energy savings and their contribution to the purpose of this task is not easily quantifiable nor enforceable.

Since the December report, some of the federal funding sources have become uncertain with the change in the federal administration.

- Some new funding announcements have since been cancelled, such as the Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas.
- The status of other new funding opportunities have become uncertain / are currently unknown due to limited communication by the federal agencies, such as the DOE WAP E&I grant.
- Some awards are conditionally approved and Maryland is awaiting further clarity on requirements to lift the conditions (IRA home energy efficiency and electrification rebate programs).
- Some existing funding sources like DOE's Weatherization Assistance Program or HUD's HOME program are proposed to be eliminated in the next federal budget.

The task force will continue to identify any available funding.

C. WORKFORCE

DHCD's current service provider network consists of approximately 370 total workers in the field and office support staff. DHCD provides ongoing training, technical assistance, and professional certification for existing network staff. DHCD projects a need for a minimum of 300 additional workers to meet increased demand and volume of the energy programs to meet targets. This primarily includes Energy Auditors and Retrofit Technicians.

Efforts are underway to engage contracting firms, local agencies, schools, colleges, and vocational programs to find and solicit interested candidates and/or potential trainees for apprenticeship and employment. In addition to the requisite technical training, DHCD also intends to teach soft skills to auditors, including how to model a project, write a scope of work, and various other professional environment skills. Other potential program benefits may include childcare for trainees, transportation for trainees, and business development skills.

DHCD is working to establish an apprenticeship program that connects companies in the industry with interested candidates to provide on-the-job training without disrupting or hindering productivity. DHCD is additionally partnering with the Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC) to add Maryland-focused information/resources to the Green Energy Workforce, an online energy career hub.

To further enhance workforce development efforts and address the growing demand for skilled labor, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has actively pursued external funding. This strategic approach aims to build a more comprehensive and sustainable workforce, particularly in critical sectors like energy efficiency and housing rehabilitation.

DHCD was recently selected for a significant award of \$2 million from the Department of Energy (DOE). This funding is earmarked for several key initiatives designed to strengthen and expand the existing workforce development programs. The primary objectives of this award include:

- Enhancement of Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) Training: The funding will be utilized to upgrade and expand training programs offered through the WAP, ensuring that participants

receive the most current and effective instruction in energy efficiency retrofits and related skills. This will include incorporating new technologies and best practices to meet evolving industry standards.

- **Targeted Recruitment in Disadvantaged Areas:** A crucial component of this initiative is to actively recruit individuals from disadvantaged communities, providing them with opportunities for skill development and meaningful employment. This outreach will involve collaborating with local community organizations and leaders to identify and engage prospective trainees.
- **Development of a Toolkit for Prospective MBE Firms:** To foster greater participation of Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) firms in state-funded projects, DHCD will develop a comprehensive toolkit. This resource will provide essential information, guidance, and support to MBE firms interested in entering or expanding their presence in the workforce development and housing sectors.
- **Proposed Apprenticeship Program:** A structured two-month apprenticeship program is proposed, offering hands-on training and practical experience. This program aims to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing participants for immediate entry into the workforce.
- **Wrap-Around Services and Job Placement:** Recognizing that successful workforce development extends beyond training, the funding will also support the provision of wrap-around services. These may include transportation assistance, childcare support, and mentorship, all designed to remove barriers to participation and ensure program completion. Furthermore, a dedicated focus will be placed on robust job placement services, connecting graduates with employment opportunities within the relevant industries.

While the \$2 million DOE award represents a significant step forward, its disbursement is currently on hold as the federal administration deliberates its priorities. This delay underscores the need for ongoing strategic planning to ensure the long-term sustainability of workforce development efforts. The current funding, once released, is anticipated to suffice for short-term needs but will not provide a sustainable solution for ongoing, comprehensive workforce development initiatives.

DHCD is actively seeking to expand its reach and effectiveness through strategic collaborations. Key partnerships are being pursued with:

- **Community Colleges:** Leveraging the established training infrastructure and educational expertise of community colleges to develop and deliver specialized courses.
- **Community-Based Organizations:** Engaging with local community organizations to connect with prospective trainees, provide localized support, and ensure that programs are responsive to community needs.

To facilitate and strengthen these external collaborations, DHCD has recently hired a dedicated Workforce Development Manager. This individual will be instrumental in engaging local contacts, forging new

partnerships, and streamlining the process of connecting trainees with available opportunities.

The acquisition of further grants is crucial for establishing a sustainable and robust workforce development pipeline that can meet the evolving demands of Maryland's housing and energy sectors. These ongoing efforts are essential for building a skilled and adaptable workforce that can support the state's economic growth and community development goals.

Additional opportunities for future workforce development will continue to be explored by the task force.

3. SUMMARY

To address the barriers identified in the Green and Healthy Task Force report and build upon existing efforts, DHCD and the task force will continue to work together on the areas identified as opportunities for development.

Additionally, the following actionable recommendations can be taken at the State level:

- Mandate inter-agency collaboration for streamlined referrals: Encourage or mandate collaboration between state agencies (e.g., DHCD, MDThink, OHEP, MDH, MDE) to ensure a unified approach to identifying and referring eligible households to various energy and repair programs.
- Create a dedicated repair fund: Establish a sustainable funding pool specifically for pre-weatherization health and safety repairs (e.g., mold, lead, roof leaks, electrical issues) that currently defer households from energy upgrades.
- Prioritize grant-based repair programs: Increase funding for grant-based repair programs and integrate case management services to make critical repairs more accessible to low-income households, reducing reliance on loan-based options.
- Foster inter-agency coordination for holistic repairs: Encourage formal partnerships between housing, health, and environmental agencies to develop a comprehensive approach to addressing home hazards, allowing for integrated service delivery.
- Secure stable, long-term workforce development funding: Advocate for consistent and increased state and federal funding for workforce development programs in energy efficiency and housing rehabilitation, moving beyond short-term grant cycles.
- Facilitate partnerships with educational institutions: Provide incentives for community colleges and vocational schools to develop and expand specialized curricula that align with the needs of the energy efficiency and housing rehabilitation industries.