

You CAN cut your utility bills

New effort is being sponsored by the state's BPU and Clean Energy Program

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JACKSON — Lizanne Smith sounds exasperated when she talks about how much it costs to heat, cool and light her home.

"We have outrageous utility bills," said Smith, who, along with her husband, Bob, bought a 3,200-square-foot new home about six years ago. "They build these beautiful homes, but they don't tell you how much it costs to run them."

In the case of the Smiths, their electric and natural gas bills total about \$720 each month.

Now she's hoping to lower their expenses. On Thursday, home energy auditors from Refrigeration Services Inc., a heating, ventilation and air-conditioning contractor in Wall, performed an analysis of the Smith house.

The tests are designed to find leaks, drafts and inefficiencies in how the house uses energy. By making a home completely energy-efficient, an owner can save up to 30 percent on energy costs, state regulators say.

It is part of a new program called Home Performance with Energy Star, sponsored by the state Board of Public Utilities and New Jersey's Clean Energy Program. Gov. Corzine is pushing to reduce New Jersey's energy consumption by 20 percent by 2020.

"This is an absolutely important program if we are going to move forward with reaching the energy goals on energy efficiency," said Mike Winka, director of the BPU's office of clean energy. "This is designed to really get the person to say, 'I want to change the energy use in my home, and I want to do this wholesale across the board.'"

The program aims to help homeowners find contractors, trained and accredited by the Building Performance Institute, of Malta, N.Y. who can do a complete energy-use inventory of their homes.

For instance, one test determines how much air leaks from a home's ducts. Another can detect air leaks from ceiling light fixtures, windows and doors. A room that is too hot or too cold can be a sign of poor insulation.

The examination covers everything from air-conditioning and heating systems to appliances and lighting. "They come in and look at your home from top to bottom," Winka said.

After the test, auditors will write a report detailing the homeowner's energy use, and make specific recommendations to fix problems, including how long it will take to recoup the cost of upgrades through savings on their bills.

The New Jersey Clean Energy program offers incentives to help homeowners obtain low-interest loans to help finance upgrades or give them rebates if they decide to pay without financing, said Don Swift, technical and quality control director for New Jersey at Conservation Services Group in Woodbridge, which is managing Home Performance with Energy Star.

The audits are not free. The study can cost a homeowner between \$250 and \$600 depending on the size of the house, Swift said.

Smith said the audit will give her family a comprehensive look at the options for energy efficiency and exactly how much money each recommendation will save so they can decide what they want to do.

"Until it is actually done and digested in a format that I as a homeowner can understand, it is all very vague."

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