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## COMMENTARY

### Our Big Moment For Equity In Energy Efficiency



*Energy is a political commodity and its cost has political ramifications.*

*Leigh Paterson / Inside Energy*

By Mary Wambui-Ekop

September 29, 2021

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For years, Massachusetts has been a national leader in energy efficiency through our widely celebrated state program known as Mass Save. The program provides customer-

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conditioning, and smart thermostats. And while its accomplishments are many and have been [rightfully celebrated](#), the program has also fallen short when it comes to ensuring that the program's benefits are felt in all of our communities, not just those with the most resources to take advantage of everything it has to offer.

A 2020 study that [analyzed participation](#) in Mass Save in different cities and towns across the state found major disparities in program participation between more affluent communities, and environmental justice communities like Lawrence, Chelsea, Lynn, and Fall River. These disparities are even more glaring when we consider that the communities receiving the least of the program's benefits also bear the greatest burden of the state's environmental impacts, and also pay a disproportionate amount of their income towards their energy bills.

We can do better, and the good news is, our long awaited chance to improve the program has now arrived.

Over the next few weeks, the state's Energy Efficiency Advisory Council and the Department of Public Utilities will have a rare opportunity to codify a series of fixes to gaps in the program that for too long have left too many behind – particularly in communities that experience higher rates of poverty, and communities of color. The current draft of the next [3-Year Energy Efficiency Plan](#), which will be voted on by the end of October and which the state utilities will be required to implement, can give us the tools we need to make sure we get this right. In a critically important “first” for energy efficiency in Massachusetts -- and the result of tireless work by advocates, members of the [Energy Efficiency Advisory Council's Equity Working Group](#), and other important stakeholders -- equity and electrification are now clearly included as major priorities in the three-year draft plan under consideration.

So what are the “must-haves” in the Commonwealth's next energy efficiency plan?

First, let's increase our investments in connecting households in environmental justice communities with Mass Save's benefits, and to partner with municipalities and community organizations that can help overcome barriers that lead to gaps in service in places with the greatest need for energy savings and less pollution. We need a final plan that brings municipal partners to the table to design the outreach strategies that can meet the unique needs of each community. If a municipality hires an energy efficiency focused staff member, they should be empowered to present a proposal to MassSave

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undertake upgrades that can benefit their tenants would go a long way towards reaching communities that have historically lacked access.

Second, let's invest in an inclusive energy efficiency workforce. Equitable participation in energy efficiency also means creating pathways for diverse workers in the energy efficiency workforce. We can do this by putting a priority on wealth building jobs for minority contractors in the energy efficiency field, and developing a multilingual workforce who are experts in their communities and can help to improve access in language-isolated communities.

Lastly, let's ensure that there is transparency and accountability so that this plan truly translates into greater participation and engagement with residents in environmental justice communities. We are fortunate to now have access to data that tells us more than we've ever known before about which cities and towns require our most intentional efforts and investment to participate – let's put measures in place to be accountable to those goals.

Thoughtful and equitable energy efficiency policy and planning gives us proven tools to help address the economic, public health, housing, and environmental inequities that the COVID pandemic continues to lay bare. And it serves to enlist more Massachusetts households in the state's journey towards decarbonization and meeting our ambitious climate goals. So many passionate grassroots advocates and policymakers have worked so hard for years to bring us to this moment where Massachusetts can move forward with a truly equitable program that can be a national model for how to do this right. It's now up to the EEAC, and the Baker Administration's Department of Public Utilities to bring it over the finish line.

*Mary Wambui-Ekop is a member of the Massachusetts Energy Efficiency Advisory Council, representing residential consumers.*

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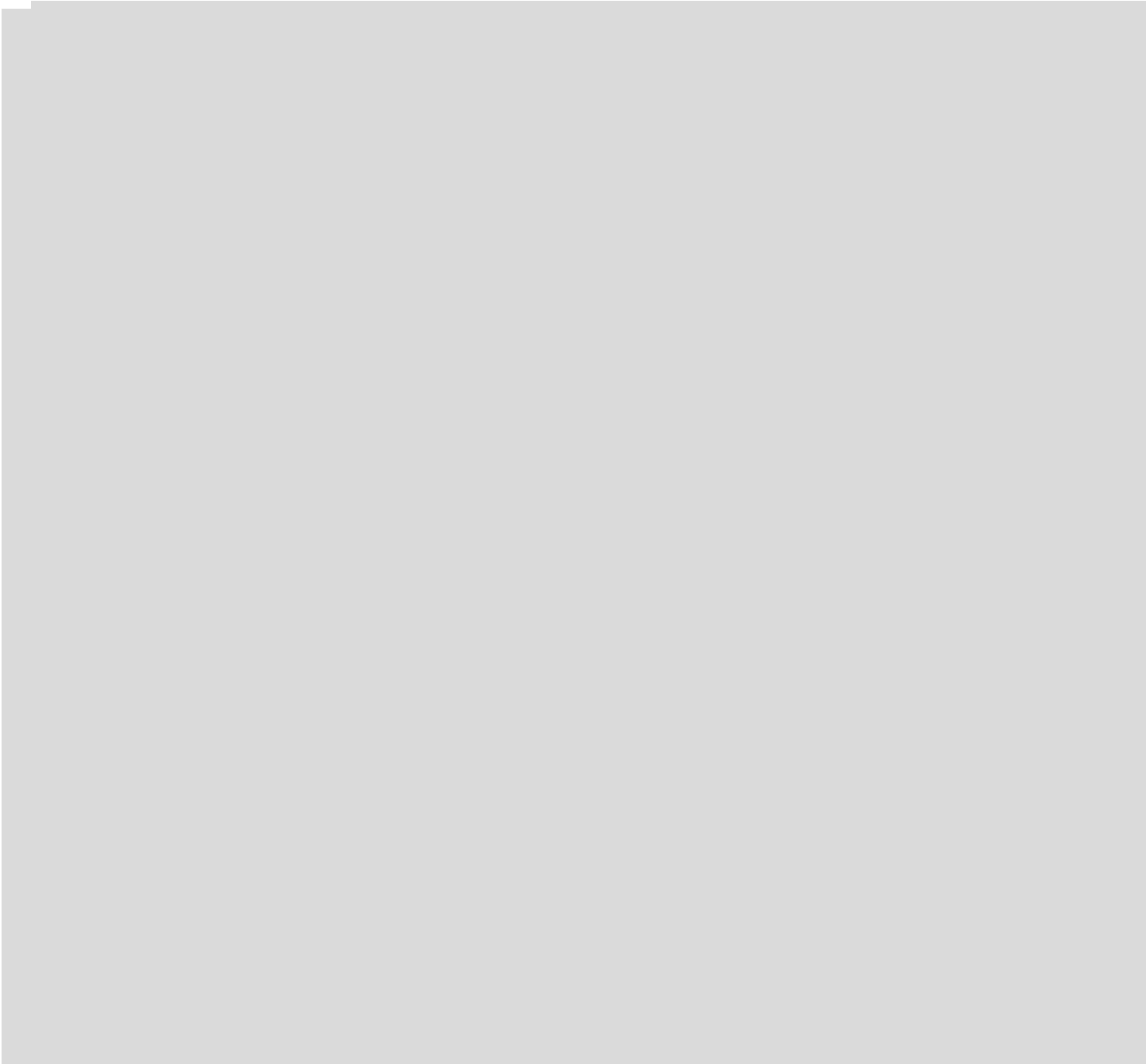


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