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EDITORIAL / OPINION

Op-ed: Mass. can't be No. 1 without equity

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For nine years running, the commonwealth has been the nation's top-ranked state for energy efficiency, a much-celebrated accolade. And indeed there is a lot to celebrate about the state's program — the American Council for an Energy Efficiency Economy last year said the state "leads by example" in its energy requirements for buildings, transportation fleets, and in delivery of energy savings and carbon reduction from the MassSave program, which is administered by the utilities. Through this program, households can reduce their carbon footprint and decrease their energy bills by taking advantage of incentives for upgrades such as heat pumps, high-efficiency central air conditioning systems or smart thermostats.

But hidden beneath those rankings and press releases is an uncomfortable truth: a glaring lack of equity in which communities enjoy the greatest benefits from MassSave and which do not. These disparities are particularly unjust



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given that all customers pay into MassSave, but lower and moderate-income residents, who contribute a disproportionate percentage of their income, receive far less benefits than more affluent surrounding communities. As an appointed member of the Energy Efficiency Advisory Council representing residential consumers, I am sounding the alarm that business as usual is failing our communities.

And yet we have a moment, right now, to do something about it. The convergence of an unsparing pandemic hitting communities across Massachusetts, a dangerously spiraling climate crisis, and a critical moment of consciousness about deeply rooted systemic racism and how it manifests in public policy, is prompting advocates and policymakers alike to ask desperately needed questions about the state of equity and environmental justice in the Commonwealth. It's also time to ask why Massachusetts' energy efficiency programs have failed to deliver direct benefits to the people whose energy costs eat up a greater percentage of their income -- who also live in the same communities that have been hardest hit by COVID-19.

A report released earlier this summer by VoteSolar found that economic impacts of COVID-19 would force 20% of families nationwide into utility bill debt over the coming months as layoffs and financial fallout from the pandemic took their toll. Meanwhile, extreme heat events, fueled by our worsening climate crisis, are forcing these same households to use more energy than ever before. Across the board, these conditions place disproportionate burdens on Black and brown communities across the state, and further entrench disparities that were growing long before the pandemic began, but have been supercharged since its arrival.

A study commissioned in 2018 by Conservation Law Foundation found that lower-income neighborhoods receive substantially less efficiency savings, and a spring 2020 study commissioned by the utilities revealed shockingly large gaps in participation between communities after an examination of town-by-town data.

The utilities argue that these communities can be hard to reach, due to language barriers and lack of incentives for landlords to provide energy upgrades for their tenants. But both the utilities and the Administration have a responsibility to ensure that all communities can access these benefits equally.

If the Baker administration and the utilities are serious about achieving equity in these programs, there are four steps that will help us get there.

First, all of us on the Energy Efficiency Advisory Council (“EEAC”), at the Department of Public Utilities (“DPU”), and at the utilities administering the programs need to acknowledge the extent of this problem out loud – it cannot just fall on advocates to do so. Now that their own report has further exposed these inequities, we must commit to fixing them, and require better data collection and transparency that probes the racial and ethnic disparities in the delivery of MassSave. That must include drilling down to the neighborhood level to help grassroots community organizations better understand which communities are benefiting and which are not – a request that has thus far been ignored.

Second, the EEAC, the DPU, and the utilities need to bring community organizations to the table, not as an afterthought, but at the earliest stages of program design so that they can be a part of crafting the solutions to overcome barriers and build trust in the places where we know they are falling short. Let’s allocate the resources needed to get this done.

Third, with so many people out of work or working from home, utilities need to move more aggressively right now to ensure the program’s benefits are reaching underserved communities – especially renters -- and incentive payments to the utilities for effective delivery of the program should be held back if they do not.

And fourth, we need better policy at the state and local level to incentivize and encourage landlords to make energy efficiency upgrades for the health and economic well-being of their tenants, as well as appropriate regulations for building codes to require improvements that can benefit all of our communities.

If we want to do more than just say the right words about fighting against systemic racism and inequality, containing our escalating climate crisis, and addressing public health disparities from the pandemic – this is one proven way to do just that. Let’s live up to what it means to be #1 in the nation by ensuring that all of our communities can benefit.

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