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Grand Forks business improves home efficiency, supports weatherization for needy

The return of below-freezing temperatures could mean the return of chilly drafts in homes. A new business in Grand Forks offers a way to eliminate drafts and other energy problems — and the profits go toward providing that same weatherization service to low-income people who can't afford it.

By: Charly Haley, Grand Forks Herald

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A new business in Grand Forks offers a way to eliminate drafts and other energy problems — and the profits go toward providing that same weatherization service to low-income people who can't afford it.

401(e) Home Energy Service assesses homes for energy efficiency and then works to upgrade the home, such as adding insulation or air sealing doors and windows. If there's work needed that 401(e) can't provide, it recommends other businesses that can.

"There are places that do little bits and pieces (of weatherization), but no one else does the whole package. So we knew we had a niche," said Jason Schaefer, coordinator and energy analyst for 401(e).

Although 401(e) just started this year, Schaefer and the business's other employees have been doing weatherization for years through Red River Valley Community Action's weatherization program for low-income families.

401(e) is a for-profit business that has some of the same employees as the nonprofit Community Action. It rents office space and equipment from Community Action and donates proceeds to the nonprofit.

The idea to start 401(e) partially came from people asking Community Action about its weatherization services, even though they didn't qualify for the low-income program.

"We had a lot of people, they'd see the truck in their neighborhood, and they'd want it done in their home," Schaefer said.

And with several recent budget cuts to Community Action — which has many different programs serving low-income people in Grand Forks, Nelson, Pembina and Walsh counties — charging for weatherization services didn't seem like a bad idea, Schaefer said.

"We've been talking to our clients for all these years about being self-sufficient, and we thought, 'Well, maybe we should be more self sufficient,'" Schaefer said.

Schaefer said Red River Valley Community Action is the first of the eight Community Actions in North Dakota to start a for-profit weatherization service, but there have been others in the U.S.

Improving efficiency

When 401(e) assesses a home, energy analysts look at the efficiency of appliances like water heaters and furnaces, said Chris Loveless, senior certified energy analyst. They also look at the walls, windows, attic and foundation of the house with an infrared camera to spot air leaks, he said.

As part of providing a full consultation, analysts do diagnostic tests both before and after working on the home, to make sure they didn't make the home too tight, which can diminish air quality, Schaefer said.

All of the work can range from about \$3,000 to \$12,000, depending on the size of the home and what work is needed, Schaefer said. Old homes are usually most in need of weatherization, he said.

Eve Bostyan, of East Grand Forks, had 401(e) weatherize her home at the end of November.

"So far, so good," she said.

Bostyan described her house as unusual and very old, with several quirks including drains that would freeze.

401(e) had an insulated porch built, minimized drafts and added more insulation into Bostyan's attic to improve energy efficiency, she said.

"I really appreciate that they were able to think out of the box for me because mine isn't easy," Bostyan said.

Schaefer said 401(e) has done 15 assessments since opening this year. The business has worked on eight of those 15 homes. After the assessment, many people want to wait to have their work done, Schaefer said.

Although the 401(e) has mostly serviced homes so far, Schaefer said he'd like to expand to small commercial businesses eventually. He said many people could benefit from assessments, and he sees 401(e) growing, eventually moving out of the Community Action office space and purchasing its own equipment.

"There's a lot of work to be done," he said.

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