

# Consistent Messaging Stakeholders Working Group Final Report

## I. Introduction

### a. Type of Competitive Award

## Virginia Roadmap: Consistent Messaging Stakeholders Working Group

### b. Project goals

Multiple resources exist for consumers looking to find out more about energy efficiency programs, incentives, and technologies. The main goal of this working group was to create recommendations to the Governor's Executive Committee on Energy Efficiency for actionable, statewide messaging stakeholders can use to make the education process more effective and less confusing for consumers interested in energy efficiency. Messaging should be applicable to all residential consumers, including renters and homeowners, and result in common language each stakeholder can use. An additional goal of the group was to develop a list of best practices for successful consistent messaging.

## II. Activities Undertaken

### a. Summary of activities funded by SEP Competitive award

The Consistent Messaging Stakeholders working group convened two planning calls, two in-person meetings, and one webinar.

#### First Planning Call:

Stakeholders convened to discuss the purpose of the working group, as well as the group's goals, scope, metrics, and logistics.

The purpose of this working group is to provide a single statewide energy efficiency messaging campaign. This includes the overarching goal of identifying topline messages for educating consumers on energy efficiency. Messaging should be as broad as possible, so it can be applicable to residential renters and owners and small and large business owners. Messaging should focus more on producing common language for each entities' materials than producing common materials for everyone.

The group laid out a draft framework to help set up agendas and guidance for all subsequent meetings.

#### Second Planning Call:

This call provided an opportunity for the group to revisit and adjust the working group's goals, scope, metrics, and logistics discussed during the first call. During this call, the group decided to

focus on residential and multifamily messaging only, instead of including both residential and commercial messaging.

Additionally, the group discussed any immediate tasks that could be undertaken, including logo sharing between Virginia Energy Sense (VES) and the rest of the stakeholders and/or sharing VES's "Jack" videos.

#### Meeting One:

During the first in-person meeting, the group reviewed the goals and objectives of this working group and began taking an inventory of what messaging, materials, programs, and incentives are out there for consumers. The group also began to discuss what types of messages are most effective and what does not work, and they began to compile a list of best practices for successful consistent messaging.

Virginia Energy Sense (VES) presented on their message testing results, which included research findings regarding energy attitudes and behaviors. Overall, Virginians were found to be increasingly interested in energy savings, particularly those in the northern and central portion of the state. Saving money was found to be the strongest motivator for consumers to actually take steps to reduce energy usage. VES's research also found that for messaging to be effective, it must explain how saving energy saves money, as well as provide actionable steps that can help consumers save energy.

Dominion Virginia Power presented on energy efficiency messaging and their EnergyShare program, which helps educate customers on how to save energy.

#### Webinar:

Brian Blackmon, Project Manager for the City of Knoxville Office of Sustainability, spoke about the energy efficiency programs implemented in Knoxville, as well as the City's challenges, collaboration, and lessons learned during a webinar. Not unlike Richmond and other cities across Virginia, Knoxville is faced with an aging, inefficient housing stock where cost of living is increased due to excess energy consumption. Energy efficiency and weatherization efforts are limited by funding and cannot fully meet the need or demand for assistance.

Knoxville joined the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge, where nearly 20 stakeholder groups, including nonprofits, city agencies, foundations, and utilities, participated in a community-wide, coordinated approach to utility bill aid. From this collaboration grew the Knoxville Extreme Energy Makeover (KEEM) and Round It Up programs. KEEM provides no-cost retrofits and energy efficiency education to qualifying households. Community engagement, partnerships, and education and outreach were crucial to the success of this program.

Round It Up provides the City additional funding beyond KEEM. All residents are automatically opted into this round-up billing program with the option to opt-out at any time. With 66% of

customers currently participating, these funds have doubled the number of homes assisted with weatherization and energy efficiency efforts compared to the number assisted solely through the Department of Energy's program.

#### Meeting Two:

The final meeting of this working group consisted of reviewing the content and outcomes of the first meeting and webinar. First the group reviewed the City of Knoxville's programs to determine useful takeaways and tactics that could feasibly be implemented in Virginia now or tactics that we would want to work towards. The group also reviewed programs that are already happening throughout Virginia. This includes energy efficiency programs, education and outreach, and incentives currently offered through nonprofits, utilities, and state and federal agencies. Additionally, the working group reviewed and added to their best practices list and recommendations that arose from the first meeting.

Since the last in-person meeting, the working group has been actively reviewing and finalizing the list of best practices for successful consistent messaging and recommendations for actionable messaging stakeholders can utilize to make the education process less confusing and more effective for consumers interested in energy efficiency.

#### b. Achievements, goals met

##### i. Program elements that were particularly successful, replicable / best practices

In order to know what types of resources and information already exists for consumers and what messaging works, it was particularly helpful to have a variety of stakeholders involved in this process. Virginia Energy Sense was able to provide valuable insight into what type of messaging works, while the nonprofits and utilities provided info into the types of programs and education/outreach available to their customers. Based on input from all stakeholders involved, the working group was able to come up with the following list of best practices.

#### Best practices for successful consistent messaging:

- I. Empowerment: educate consumers on their energy bills
- II. Financial savings tends to be the primary motivator; the green message is important depending on your audience
- III. Start with the no cost/low cost energy efficiency options- lower thermostat, turn off lights
- IV. Have folks on the ground push the message: contractors, linesmen, etc.
- V. Contractors need to do their research in order to be able to inform their customers on the most energy efficient options, rebates, and programs
- VI. There should be coordination between organizations: similar messaging/materials and knowledge of existing programs
- VII. Virginia Energy Sense (VES) could be a hub for the latest energy efficiency news and research to keep all stakeholders abreast on the latest updates. Becoming a VES partner could also provide a look of consistency and uniformity among energy efficiency

stakeholders. As a partner, stakeholders will be able to display the VES logo on their website and the VES logo can also be displayed on their website.

- ii. Media: links to publications, press releases, and news articles, website(s) that reflect the results of the project, networks or collaborations fostered; technologies

[“Virginia Energy Sense Messaging Research”](#) presentation

[“Update: GEC’s Consistent Messaging Working Group”](#) blog post

- iii. Successful partnerships

During this time, all involved parties (Virginia Energy Sense, utilities, nonprofits, state agencies) were able to develop or strengthen existing partnerships with one another. The group was also able to partner with Brian Blackmon from the City of Knoxville and the entire Virginia Roadmap team.

- c. Difficulties

Virginia is a regionally diverse state, which makes it difficult to create one efficient message that will resonate with all Virginians. Effective media differs depending on the region you are targeting. Additionally, so many resources already exist, which can overwhelm consumers or send mixed messages. All energy efficiency stakeholders need to be aware of the different programs and materials offered across the Commonwealth in order to keep their customers as informed as possible. There should also be some consistency between the information available in order to streamline the educational process to make it more effective and less confusing.

- d. Lessons learned

With insight from Virginia Energy Sense’s research and the utilities and nonprofits’ customer interactions, the working group was able to compile a list of lessons learned. The following lessons were then used as the basis of developing the best practices listed above.

- Overall, consumers seem receptive to the idea of energy efficiency, especially the money savings aspect (“energy savings is money that can be spent elsewhere”).
- Affordability seems to be one of the biggest push-backs, so a tiered approach should be used when explaining energy efficiency options. Consumers are more receptive if you start out presenting the no cost/low cost options first that can be done without a contractor, such as lowering thermostats. After they start seeing the immediate improvements from those changes, they are more receptive to the higher cost options, such as window replacement
- Consumers want to be empowered and in control of their bills. They need a greater understanding of their energy bills and energy usage, which will increase the understanding that you pay for the electricity you use. This will also increase the ability

to track improvements. Pre-pay programs helps consumers see energy as a commodity, which helps them understand their bill and the benefits of energy efficiency

- Stakeholders can cover more ground by partnering with organizations willing to pass out informational materials at events.
- Since contractors are the ones on the ground telling customers about different programs, equipment options, and rebates, they can play a large role in pushing energy efficiency messaging and info if they have done their research.
- Avoided energy costs elicit a positive response from town administrators and elected officials; however, this message is less effective with vulnerable populations.
- Best practices are already being widely used by an array of stakeholders; an exchange of best practices between groups will help lead to successful, consistent messaging.
- State messaging could be used to help consumers view energy efficiency as a public good.

### III. Next Steps

- a. Will initiative be continued? Why/why not?

The purpose of this report is purely to provide recommendations to the Governor's Executive Committee on Energy Efficiency. Therefore, the working group does not have any specific next steps involving the continuation of this initiative.

- b. Funding for continued work

The purpose of this report is purely to provide recommendations to the Governor's Executive Committee on Energy Efficiency. Therefore, the working group does not have any specific next steps for funding continued work.

- c. How lessons learned will be applied

The lessons learned throughout this working group resulted in a list of best practices for successful consistent messaging and six recommendations to the Department of Energy. It is the hope of the working group that both the best practices and recommendations will be used to create effective, consistent messaging for consumers across Virginia interested in energy efficiency.

### IV. Conclusions

- a. Recommendations to DOE - e.g. what kinds of technical assistance or resources would be helpful in the future, usefulness of data tools

Recommendations:

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** More effective partnering between utilities, VES, and Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy (DMME)

- To create a more effective partnering, there should be a concerted effort between utilities, VES, and DMME to share any newly published and unpublished materials, including but not limited to events, social media posts, campaigns, graphics, articles, reports, and programs. Utilities can share this info through their billing and/or mailing materials.
- VES can highlight utilities' new events/programs/websites/etc. on the VES website, emails, and social media accounts if utilities share them with VES.
- VAEEC can send progress reports on how these things are going.
- All stakeholders should sign up to receive VES emails.
- VES could hold webinars to present findings on new studies or message testing.
  - Is it possible to have the utilities engage at the beginning of the process instead of just learning about the results?
  - VES: Testing is used to inform our own programs but VES is open to the idea (some limitations in geography).
- Someone should stay on top of new technologies and current events.
- Information sharing can happen through several pathways, including a periodic meeting of stakeholders or having information shared via email, webinars, newsletters, etc. Sharing should be symmetrical; utilities should link to and incorporate VES content, and VES should link to and incorporate utilities content.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Look at options for non-branding/co-branding of VES materials (graphics, published and unpublished articles, etc.) that utilities can use.

- Coops and utilities already have a relationship with their customers and are generally seen as trustworthy, whereas many customers may not know who VES is. Therefore, VES materials might have a greater impact if they are non-branded or co-branded with utilities.
- To help customers view VES as credible and trustworthy, utilities should reinforce or endorse the VES brand, using it alongside their own messaging. Additionally, utilities should include a reference to VES or include a VES factsheet with their billing materials.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Partner with health and safety groups to discuss the dangers of older technologies (i.e. old space heaters), as well as the benefits of newer technologies (i.e. safety, saves money).

- These groups are generally seen as a trusted resource for low-income/vulnerable communities, so they might be more effective at pushing this messaging out.
- The Green and Healthy Homes Initiative is beginning to partner with healthcare providers to help them consider a patient's living environment and improvements tied to energy efficiency, such as improved ventilation, sealing, etc. Some states are beginning to see working groups of energy efficiency advocates and healthcare providers form to focus on mitigating preventable diseases through improvements to the built environment, the Clean Air Act, etc. Clean Energy Solutions Inc. is a good resource on this effort.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Partner with stakeholders to develop and distribute special curriculum materials for schools.

- VES is working on reining messaging that could be included in curriculum for 3rd and 4th grade students that will go along with science SOLs.
  - Revamping current curriculum; hoping to complete it for the beginning of next school year
- VES should partner with stakeholders already in the classroom to help make the curriculum more practical and work with other stakeholders who may be going into classrooms.
  - Coops (REC) and Dominion already get into the classrooms and are always looking for new curriculum to bring in.
  - VES could do test cases this spring with REC and Dominion to test materials/curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Create a list of qualified energy efficient contractors and/or develop a list of questions that would help consumers make good choices in choosing a contractor.

- Contractor list (like an Angie's List for contractors specializing in energy efficiency): provide opportunities to train contractors on energy efficiency technologies and become a qualified vendor
  - DMME use to provide information on qualified contractors back when it was harder to find them in most parts of the state.
  - Rappahannock Electric Cooperative (REC) has a list of contractors (or at least they have in the past).
  - Partnering with associations representing qualified contractors and including links to these contractors could make this task easier. Potential associations could include the following: Associated General Contractors of VA; Alliance for Construction Excellence; National Home Service Contract Association (VA Chapter); Association of Real Estate Inspectors; VA Homebuilders; VA Manufactured + Modular Housing Association; American Council of Engineering Companies; Associated Builders and Contractors VA Chapter; etc.
- Questions list: Educate consumers to ask the right questions when trying to find a contractor and define frequently used terminology
  - Craft a set of questions that help consumers make good choices in choosing a contractor
    - REC Energy Advisors may have a list of questions to work off of
  - These questions could be uniformly used throughout the state for people at all income levels
    - Provides guidance to groups who do not qualify for assistance
  - VES educates on terminology
  - A few published examples from credible organizations likely exist

- Look to other states, such as Minnesota, for examples of questions and terminology. The Energy Services Coalition could also be a valuable resource.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** Make a concerted effort to engage with other low-income assistance programs and have them share information on energy saving tips (i.e. Community Action Agencies, public health officials).

- These agencies generally have a good relationship with the public and are seen as a trusted source of information.
- In the past, REC lineman had kits on hand to give out materials on energy saving tips. Kits included caulk, weather stripping, light bulbs, plastic for windows, and a 101 low-cost/no-cost tip booklet with contact info for agencies that could help with further assistance.
  - Kits have also been given out at events.
  - Linesmen have greater face-to-face time with customers and REC has a good relationship with their customers.
- Some overlapping already exists through Dominion's Energy Share program (Energy Share agencies).
- Kits would cost money, so they may be less feasible; however, connecting with these agencies can be easily achieved.
- Potential stakeholder groups that could be beneficial to partner with: large home improvement retailers, environmental groups who have audiences with invested interest in energy consumption reduction (e.g. Southern Environmental Law Center, Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy of Virginia, Piedmont Environmental Council, Chesapeake Bay Foundation), umbrella organizations for real estate/commercial properties/building tenants (e.g. Virginia Association of Realtors, Virginia Apartment and Management Association (and affiliates)), Virginia Retail Merchants Association; Virginia Restaurant, Lodging, and Travel Association, etc.; and bankers associations (so bankers are aware of EE incentives and programs when customers come looking for a loan for a home improvement project).